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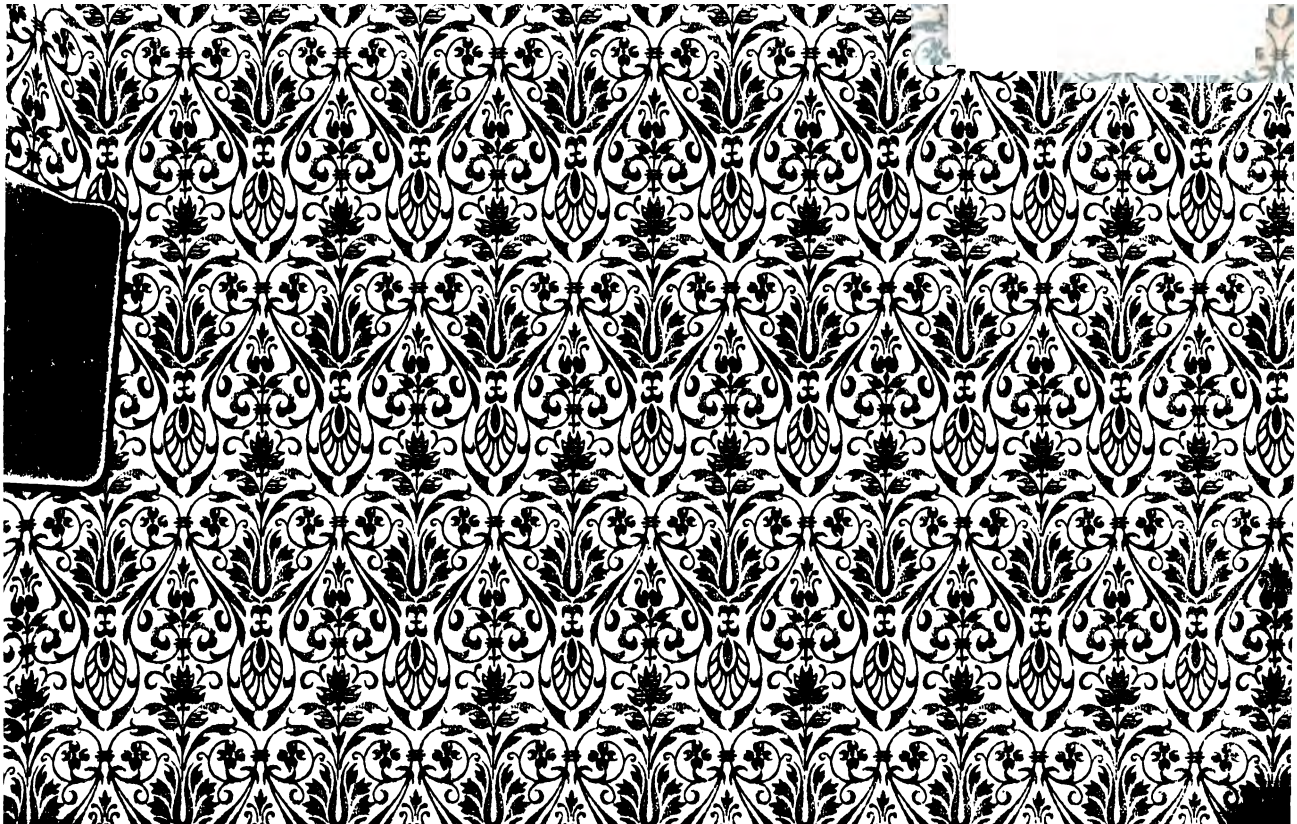
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OF
CONVENIENCE
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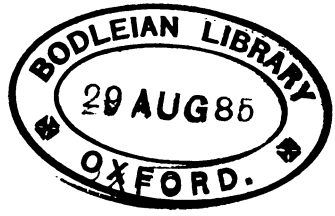
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A MARRIAGE OF CONVENIENCE.

CHAPTER I.

A MARRIAGE OF CONVENIENCE.

CHAPTER I.

CONTAINS AN EXTRACT FROM DR. PRIESTLEY'S DIARY.

I SIR JOHN PRIESTLEY, Knight and M.D., of Berkeley Street, Mayfair, have been asked by one of the most charming of my patients to extract from the diary I have kept for many years certain portions which refer to a mysterious drama which took place in 1872, and in which I played a small but important part. Having satisfied myself that compliance will entail no breach of confidence, I have no hesitation in granting my fair patient's request, paraphrasing

rather than merely transcribing the contents of my note-book, and suppressing all medical technicalities, which would be interesting only to medical men.

"Beg pardon, sir; where to?"

"Where to? Oh, anywhere—the first station you come to! No, to St. Pancras," I replied, and was about to step into the hansom, upon which my travelling bag had been deposited, when a detaining hand was laid heavily upon my shoulder.

I turned, and faced a man, tall, swarthy, slightly built, and elegantly dressed. His eyes were fixed with a curious expression upon my face.

"Doctor Priestley, I believe," he said, speaking with a slight foreign accent.

I nodded.

"And you are about to start upon a journey?" he continued, glancing at my impedimenta on the top of the cab. "May I ask if the journey is of very great importance?"

"Of no importance whatever," I replied; "I was merely going away somewhere for a few days' rest and change."

"That is fortunate, since you will have less scruple in staying: I require your immediate attention for a case of urgent danger."

I looked at him more carefully, and noticed that he seemed much agitated, yet he was a man of a stern cast of countenance, and evidently endowed with considerable self-command. My hesitation seemed to trouble him, for he again put his trembling hand upon my arm.

"There is no time to lose," he said; "while we are standing here the patient may die. Pray come!"

Then, taking the management of affairs into his own hands, he ordered my man-servant, who stood near, to remove my luggage from the cab, hurried me into another, which was evidently waiting for him, and took his seat beside me, and we rattled away.

The whole affair had taken place so rapidly that the cab, going along at full speed, had covered at least a mile before I recovered myself; then, in a half-bewildered manner I began to wonder what it all meant. A matter of a few minutes had changed my plans considerably; instead of being on my way to some quiet country retreat, here was I, sitting by the side of a

man whom I had never seen before, going to some unknown spot, to play a part in some new mystery of London. For already I had scented mystery; the man's whole manner betokened it, and his after proceedings proved me to be right.

The cab stopped at the top of Park Lane; we alighted, and walked on. Presently we entered a side street, and stopped before a door, which my guide opened with a latch-key. We entered, and the door shut quickly behind us.

We were now in comparative darkness. I could make no note whatever of the surroundings, but I followed quickly upon the footsteps of my guide, and was finally ushered into a large room furnished as a boudoir in the extreme of modern fashion. A lamp standing upon the table was dimly

shaded; the air was softly perfumed; numberless elegant tokens stamped it as being the bower of some great lady.

I had only time to take a cursory glance, when my guide again tapped me on the shoulder and pointed. Following the direction indicated by his outstretched hand, I saw lying upon a couch in a sort of alcove, what appeared to be the lifeless body of a gentleman dressed in evening attire. By his side was a lady, also in evening dress, kneeling upon the floor, her face buried in her hands, and sobbing bitterly.

Obeying another sign from my guide, I waited while he himself went forward, and with courtly deference took the lady's hand.

"Madame," said he, "I have brought

with me a surgeon; will you have the great goodness to retire?"

Still sobbing bitterly, the lady rose, while the gentleman, by a little clever manœuvring, managed to prevent my getting a full glimpse of her face. He led her to a door, not the one by which we had entered, but another which was concealed by curtains of pale blue satin, and when she disappeared he returned to me.

"That is your patient, doctor," said he; "save his life, and you will be made a comparatively rich man."

I proceeded, with the aid of my guide, to make a careful examination. The patient was a powerfully-built man of four or five and twenty, with a strikingly handsome cast of countenance—fair hair, light

moustache, in fact, an Adonis in a dress suit.

His shirt front was suffused with blood, issuing from a wound in the breast —an old flesh wound, which, after partially healing, had suddenly reopened— how I could only surmise.

"The man is in mortal danger," I said, when the examination was over.

"But he may recover?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"There is one way of treating the case which would mean either life or death."

"Are you willing to try that method?"

I hesitated.

"If he recovers," proceeded my companion, "there is a fortune for the preserver of his life."

"Well, I will undertake it."

"Good! Now, to begin with, he must be removed."

"Removed? Impossible!"

"My dear sir, we must make it possible. If he remains in this house not all the skill in Christendom will save his life."

The first thing to be done was to dress the wound, and this I did without further parley. In the course of the operation the gentleman recovered consciousness. As the colour stole slowly back into his cheeks and his eyes opened, they rolled slowly around the room as if in search of something, then he muttered feebly—

"Constance, where are you?"

Before he could say more my companion, whose keen eyes never left the patient's face, stepped quickly to his side and whispered something in his ear. At this the

sick man groaned, turned his head wearily upon the pillow, and closed his eyes as if he were falling to sleep.

My guide tapped me on the shoulder and took me aside.

"My dear doctor," said he, "while you have been working I have been thinking. I have sketched in my mind our plan of action, and it must be followed or nothing can be done. For the present, then, your work is finished. Go home and wait for your patient, who will be removed to your house."

"To my house?"

"The whole of this arrangement," he continued, not heeding my interruption, "must be carried out with the utmost secresy. Not a soul must see the patient carried from here—not a soul must see him

enter your doors. I will arrange for the secresy here—you must arrange for it on your side. Oblige me by making the requisite preparations, and, for the present, good-bye."

Seeing that I was dismissed, I prepared to leave the room. I was re-conducted down a flight of stairs, along a dark passage, and finally I was shown again into the street.

My first move was to hail a hansom, and drive at once to my house, my next to inform my servants that owing to sudden and unexpected work I should not be able to pay my visit to the country. Having done this without arousing suspicion of any kind, I set about thinking how I could smuggle my mysterious patient into the house, and, more difficult still, how I could

manage to keep him there without the fact of his presence becoming publicly known.

It was a difficult task; yet, according to my instructions, it had to be fulfilled. After some trouble, I accomplished my task, and at eleven o'clock that night everything was in readiness for the patient's reception. My servants were all in bed and sleeping soundly—all except my man Schmitz, on whom I could rely; a room, which no one ever entered, had been arranged by me, and in it stood a bed, on which the mysterious stranger was to lie.

But now I paused. It was a bold deed I was about to do, and one not unmixed with danger. In all probability the man would die, in which case what was to pregent my being accused of murder? Under

less suspicious circumstances many a man had been hanged, and I knew it. For all I could tell a murder had been attempted, and this little ruse had been planned in order that the victim might be safely disposed of. My hesitation turned to decision; I resolved to have nothing more to do with this mysterious affair, but to follow the example of my servants and retire to my quiet rest, when I was startled by the faint ringing of my door bell. I started. I believed that the patient had arrived, but I made no attempt to open the door. The bell rang again, but so faintly I almost fancied the sound had been produced by an extra gust of wind. This time, however, I opened the door; and a figure hurriedly entered. A lady, clothed from head to foot in black

and heavily veiled. She was trembling violently, and her dress was saturated with the heavily falling rain.

"Sir," she said hurriedly, "I wish to speak to you."

Without a word I led the way into my study, and the lady followed me. Once inside the room she gave a quick glance about her, and quietly raised her veil. Then I saw that my visitor was a young girl about twenty years of age, and with the most beautiful face it had ever been my lot to see. Her skin was as white as alabaster, her hair as black as jet, while her eyes, which were large and lustrous, were fixed upon my face with a look which went to my very soul.

"Am I wrong in supposing you to be Dr. Priestley?" she asked.

"I am Dr. Priestley," I returned.

She looked at me for a moment, then she stretched forth her hand. I saw that it was small and shapely, and that the fingers were covered with gems.

The wild despairing look faded from her eyes, and they brightened up with a ray of hope.

"Sir," she said sweetly, "I came to look at your face. I am glad that I came. The sight of you gives me courage. Yes, it is the first ray of comfort that has come to me in the midst of a terrible despair!"

"Indeed!" I replied, "I do not understand."

"I will explain, sir. You are about to receive into your care a patient; a young man who is suffering from a dangerous

wound. I have come to tell you, sir, that that young man's life is more precious to me than my own; that if he dies, his innocent blood will be the stain upon me which will drag me to my grave, and—and," she added in trepidation, "I wish you to receive this and also my solemn assurance that the day the gentleman is pronounced out of danger, I will make you a rich man!"

She held a pocket-book towards me. I saw that it was filled with notes. I motioned it back.

"If you will permit me to kiss your hand," I said, "and hear your name, that is all I ask."

At this peculiar request she drew herself up, and a strange look passed over her face, but after a moment's hesitation she

extended her left hand. I raised the fingers and touched them with my lips.

"Your name is "——

"The Duchess d' Azzeglio."

"Married?"

"Yes, married," she repeated; and as she spoke the words I felt unaccountably troubled and disappointed. What did it all mean? Was I mad, or dreaming? It seemed that I was both, for one look into that face had changed my whole nature. And who was this man whom I was about to receive under my care? was he her husband—or—but no, not even in thought could I couple evil with such a face as that.

I rubbed my eyes to make sure of my wakefulness; I turned again to speak to the lady—she was gone.

I ran to the door and opened it, there was no sign of a soul; all I heard was the sound of carriage wheels passing up the street; the sighing of the wind and the dreary patter of the heavily falling rain.

More mystified than ever, I returned to my room, and the first thing I saw was the pocket-book lying upon my table. I opened it and found that it contained a large sum in bank notes. After a moment's hesitation I put it safely away under lock and key, and then, strangely agitated, I sat down to await the arrival of my mysterious patient.

Here for the present must end the transcript from Dr. Priestley's note-book. It is now necessary to chronicle the events which culminated in the mysterious episode of the wounded man.

CHAPTER II.

CHAPTER II.

THREE years before the occurrence of the event chronicled in the preceding chapter, a lady was seated in a richly furnished dressing-room in a house in Portland Place. It was one o'clock in the morning.

The lady who was about seventy years of age was dressed in a loose robe of black cashmere, and she sat in a large easy chair. In her left hand, which hung at her side, she held a letter; her eyes were fixed thoughtfully on the ground before her, her whole attitude betokened expectancy.

Everything about her was intensely still,

the only sound being the sonorous ticking of a large bronze clock which stood upon the mantelpiece.

At last there was a light tap upon the door. Then the door gradually opened, and a young girl looked cautiously into the room. No sooner did her eyes fall upon the occupant of the chair, than she entered boldly, closed the door behind her, and crossing the room sank down upon the floor at the lady's feet.

"Dear Gradmama," she said, "it is so late for you to be up. When Osborne told me you wished to see me I could scarcely believe it. Is anything the matter?"

"Nothing is the matter that need alarm you, Constance. Why are you home so early? I did not look for you for another hour or so."

"Yet it is well I came," returned the girl, smiling. "The Countess was indisposed, and wished to leave, so of course, she brought me home."

There was silence for a few moments. The girl drew towards her a footstool, and sat upon it. In making this movement her eyes fell upon the letter which her grandmother still held in her hand. At sight of the handwriting she started and blushed.

"Grandma," she said, uneasily, "that letter is from Frank, is it not?"

"Yes, dear."

"And it was to speak about that—that you determined to sit up until I returned from the ball?"

"Yes."

"Well," continued the girl, growing

more nervous as she proceeded, "I had better tell you at once that Frank was at the ball to-night, and—and he proposed to me again!"

This time the old lady did not speak, but her face grew hard as iron.

The girl trembled, noticing the change.

"Ah, do not be angry, dear," she said, showering warm kisses on the withered hands. "Do not blame Frank, for he is not to blame. He loves me, and I—oh, I love him so much; if you persist in keeping us apart, I shall not care to live!"

"This is folly, Constance," returned the old lady, gravely. "A childish passion such as you feel could be fought against and conquered, if you would but try."

The girl shook her head.

"That was what you said last year,

grandma, and then I thought you might be right; I did not know. And since you wished so very much that we should never come together, I promised you that I would try to cease to care for Frank, and, if possible, to forget him. Well, I have tried; for one whole year I have neither seen him nor heard from him. I have endeavoured for your sake to forget him, but I cannot. When he came into the room to-night I felt that never, until my dying day, could I love another man. Grandma —dear grandma, tell me why it is you are so obdurate. Do you think Frank is unworthy?"

"Yes; I think when a man has once deceived he will deceive again."

"What do you mean?" asked the girl, opening her eyes in fear.

"I mean that when Frank wrote this letter he did it with the deliberate intention of misleading me. He says he will come to-morrow to beg my consent to your engagement, and he leads me to believe that until he has my consent he will not trouble you. Yet he went to the ball to-night and made love to you again."

The girl smiled. Evidently this fault in her lover was no very heinous one in her eyes.

"I do not pretend to say that Frank is faultless," she replied; "but indeed he is freer from faults than most men, and there is one thing which makes up for all—he loves me very dearly. As for that letter, when he wrote it he meant no deception; he did not know that he would meet me to-night until we were face to face.".

The old lady smiled incredulously, and the girl, noting this, proceeded eagerly:

"You are cruel, grandma, indeed you are; your hatred to Frank makes you unjust to him. What has he ever done that you should treat him so? Do you not see that you are breaking his heart—and mine?"

"Yours? Why should your heart break? What have you in the world to wish for? You have a title which most girls would give their souls for, and you have all my wealth!"

"Wealth—a title—what are they without happiness! I tell you, grandma, I would rather be the poorest beggar than lose my Frank. I know what you would say, I have money enough to buy a title which would place me on an equality with

Princes. Most girls in my position would gratify your ambition and do as you wish; but I am not like other girls. I cannot act against my conscience; I cannot be untrue to myself."

"Then this is your final decision; you are determined to marry Frank Howarth?"

"Yes."

"Despite all my care and devotion, in spite of all the money I have endowed you with; despite the fact that all my life I have been working to secure your happiness, you refuse to grant the only request I have ever made."

"Oh, do not say so! I would do anything in the world but that."

"Anything but that! What other request have I ever made or am likely to

make? Well, the matter must rest so, I suppose. Good-night."

Slowly and deliberately she rose from her seat and took a few steps across the floor, her long black draperies trailing behind her, her left hand grasping the letter with a cruel, venomous grip. For a moment the girl watched her with streaming eyes and wildly beating heart; then she sprang forward, and seizing the black robe, she covered her face and burst into wild hysterical sobbing.

"Do not leave me so!" she cried. "I cannot bear it; my heart will break!"

The lady paused for a moment and looked down into the fair young face which was now turned appealingly to her. How lovely the girl looked! she still wore her exquisite ball-dress, and her neck and arms

were ablaze with gems; her hair had become disarranged, and her cheeks were flushed and wet with tears. A little above her was the face of her grandmother, white and cold as marble. The clear grey eyes regarded the girl for a moment, then the old lady stretched forth her right hand and raised her from the ground.

"Good-night, Constance, good-night," she said.

This time she stooped to kiss her, but her kiss was as cold as ice.

At ten o'clock the next morning Mrs. Meason took her place in the breakfast-room at 6, Portland Place, with as calm an air as if nothing whatever had occurred to disturb her serenity on the night before.

Despite the old lady's reserve, however, certain whispers as to the true state of things between her and her granddaughter were going about the house, for Lady Constance's maid had told how that young lady had, on returning from the ball, been summoned to her grandmotner's rooms; how about an hour later she had left there, flushed and feverish, only to spend the night in tears.

When at length Lady Constance entered the breakfast-room her appearance seemed sufficient confirmation of all that had been said. Her face was pale, and her eyes showed signs of recent tears. She went straight up to her grandmother, put her arms around her neck and kissed her fondly; then she took her seat at the table, and the meal was commenced.

It was the dreariest of breakfasts; scarcely a word was spoken by either of the ladies present, and neither seemed to have appetite enough to eat. When the meal was over, and the servants had left the room, Lady Constance rose, walked over to the window, and stood there idly toying with the flowers. She looked very pretty clad in a simple white dress with a few geraniums at her belt. Her black hair was bound about her head, but her eyes, usually so bright and smiling, were very sad.

"Constance, come here."

The girl started, walked across to where the old lady sat, and knelt beside her chair.

"Yes, grandma."

The old lady raised her face and looked

at it; as she did so her own features softened.

"My child," she said, "you have done of your own free will the deed I would have shielded you from. You have laid beneath your own feet a mine which may one day destroy you."

"Grandma," cried the girl, in terror, "what do you mean?"

"I mean that the day you marry Frank Howarth all happiness for you will end. He has his own family traits. I knew that the moment I looked in his face, and it was for your sake, and yours only, that I begged you to pause. Had you been a different girl, Constance," the old lady continued, "had you been cold, hard-hearted, and callous, as I had tried so hard to make you, I should have given a very

different answer that day when this young man came to me, his face all alive with love, and asked for your hand. I should have married you to him, and through your agency your mother might have been avenged. But I saw that, despite my stern training, you had grown into a tender, timid girl, capable of loving very deeply, and, seeing this, I knew that your cousin Frank was the last man on whom you should set your heart."

"You disliked him so much even then," said the girl, reproachfully. "You did not know him. When he came to tell you of his love for me it was the first time you had seen him. How could you know he was unworthy?"

"Do you expect to find a fig upon a

pear-tree, or a rose upon a thistle? He is a Howarth; that is enough."

There was a knock at the door, the footman entered bearing a card, upon which the old lady read:

"Captain Frank Howarth!"

"I will come to the drawing-room," she said, and the footman retired.

Constance leapt to her feet, her face turning from red to deathly white; her hands, which trembled violently, eagerly clutched her companion's dress.

"Grandma," she cried; "what will you say?"

"What do you wish me to s[illegible] Constance?"

"Ah! do not torture me!" cried the girl, as the tears streamed from her eyes. "I love him with all my heart and so[illegible]ll."

"If I send him away, your heart will break; if he remains"—she sighed heavily —"Well, perhaps it is better to enjoy a few hours of happiness," she continued, "since the issue must be the same; we do not cloud the life of children with the inevitable shadow of death!" With these words she left the room.

Fully an hour passed, when the door of the room again opened, and this time the figure of a young man appeared. He stretched forth his arms.

"Constance," he said, softly. With a glad cry, Constance flittered across the room and fell upon his breast.

CHAPTER III.

CHAPTER III.

"FRANK!"

"Yes, darling."

"You have never yet told me why grandma, when she consented to our engagement, made that stupid proviso that it should be kept a secret for two years."

The lovers, whose betrothal was only two days old, were alone in the great drawing-room at Portland Place. Constance, looking very elegant, still wore her habit, while near to her was her lover, also in riding dress. He was a handsome young fellow of one or two-and-twenty,

tall, broad-shouldered, with close-cut auburn hair, and a face well-tanned with the sun.

The two had just returned from their ride in the Row. While under the eye of the footman they had gravely sipped their tea, and talked of things in general; but the moment that functionary took his departure Frank was by his cousin's side, looking into her face and pressing her hand.

It was very hot outside; one of those scorching days which made fagged Londoners dream of green fields and rippling streams; but inside the room where the lovers sat the air was cool and balmy.

The great windows were thrown open and shaded by sunblinds, here and there

about the room were elegant vases, filled with choice flowers.

Lady Constance, as if to escape from the look with which her lover was regarding her, strolled over to one of these, chose a red rose and brought it to him.

He kissed it as he took it from her hand, and placed it in his coat.

"That is the emblem of true love, Connie," said he.

The girl laughed.

"No more sentimental nonsense, sir, if you please," she replied. "Talk rationally for once, and tell me why our engagement is to be kept a secret, and what grandma said to you that day. You were about three hours together."

The young fellow smiled.

"One hour, Connie," said he; "but you were waiting for me, my love, so it seemed to you like three."

"Now you are laughing again. If you do not become serious, and tell me what I wish to know, I shall fetch grandma down!"

"Where is she?"

"Taking tea in her boudoir. I asked her to join us here, but she refused. She is so strange; I cannot understand her, Frank. Sometimes I think she hates me, for she cannot bear to see me happy!"

"Yes, she is very singular," returned the young man, gravely, "but she does not hate you, darling."

"Then why is she afraid to see me happy, Frank—do you know?"

"Yes, I think I do!"

"And you will tell me?"

"If you wish it, darling; but the story is a very sad one. Why should our happiness be clouded at the outset?"

"If it refers to my parents, I should like to hear it," returned the girl. "Do you know, Frank, I think I know less about them than anyone. All I have ever been told is that my mother was grandma's daughter, that my father was your uncle, your father's elder brother. When I met you over at Frankfort and you told me you were my cousin, I could scarcely believe it. I had always imagined that all my relations were dead. Why is it grandma never sees any of my father's family? Does she dislike them? Are they not friends?"

The young man shook his head.

"I am afraid, Constance, she dislikes them all, including my father and myself."

"And you know why it is?"

This time he nodded.

"Yes, I know *now!*"

"Did grandma tell you?"

"No, she showed such bitter animosity towards me and mine that I began to speculate as to the cause. Now I partly understand why it was she insisted upon our engagement being kept secret for so long, and exacted a promise from me that until the end of that period I would never, under any pretext whatever, introduce you to a single member of my family."

"Why was it, Frank?"

"She wished to accustom herself to the

thought of meeting with people whom she so cordially detests!"

The girl shuddered. "Oh, how dreadful!" she exclaimed.

"Do you wish you had never met me, Connie?"

"How can you ask that, Frank," she said, slipping her hand into his. "Until I met you I never knew what life was. If you were taken from me I think that I should die!"

"Then if I tell you a story, a very painful story, it will not change your love?"

She looked at him, and as she did so a strange change passed over her face; the bright, yielding look of love vanished, and the features set in strange determination.

"Nothing on earth could change my love for *you*, Frank," she said. "So long as you are true to me, I shall be true to you!"

"My darling," he cried, pressing her tenderly, "and now for my revelation. I will put it in the form of a story, and you will understand. Well, there was once a young girl, very much like you, Connie, who lived with her mother in a quaint country place, like Avondale Castle. Both of these ladies were immensely rich, for the father of the young lady had amassed a large fortume in India, and had died, leaving it all to his wife and only child. The young girl being rich, and very beautiful, had two stepping-stones to fortune. The mother was an ambitious woman, and longed for

one thing, which she had never been able to obtain, an entrance into good society. She determined, therefore, to buy a title for her daughter, and under that daughter's wing to obtain her wish. The two spent their time between London and Devonshire. During the season they lived in Portland Place, and when the season came to an end they retired to their country house, which they proceeded to fill with guests. The young lady was presented at Court, and for one short season her beauty made her the rage. At the end of it she received a proposal of marriage from a man of title—an earl. The gentleman came of a proud, aristocratic family, which, however, he had brought to the verge of ruin. He had gambled and

betted, and had so heavily mortgaged his estates that a wealthy marriage was the only thing to save him. He accordingly proposed to the richest heiress in England, although he did not love her; and while he was content to make use of her money to restore his family estates, he looked down upon her as a *parvenu*."

"And the lady?" said Constance. "Did she marry him for his title, or did she love him?"

"Unfortunately, my darling, she loved him far too well. Despite her wealth, she was a simple girl with no ambition, and she had showered all the love of her young heart upon this man. Well, the marriage took place—one-half of the lady's fortune, which was consider-

able, went to free the mortgaged estates. Now, mark the sequel; at the end of a year the young Countess returned to her girlhood's home, a child was born, and when the little thing was a few weeks old, the mother died!"

"She was killed!" cried the girl, with flaming cheeks and tear-dimmed eyes, "killed by the cruelty and neglect of the man who had married her."

"Hush, my darling!" said Frank, taking her trembling hand in his. "That man was your father!"



CHAPTER IV.

CHAPTER IV.

THE London season began to flag, fewer horses and carriages were seen in the Row, fashionable squares began to look deserted, and fashionable beauties, jaded with ceaseless rounds of gaiety, began to long for the refreshing breath of the sea. But while some lingered, eager to catch any butterfly of pleasure which might flutter their way, many had already departed, and amongst these latter were Mrs. Meason and her granddaughter, Lady Constance Howarth.

Frank Howarth, calling one morning

at Portland Place, found, on entering, that the whole house was in a state of the utmost commotion, the satin upholstery of the drawing-room had disappeared behind brown holland covers, the great crystal chandeliers were enveloped in linen bags, and the piano at which Constance had sat so many nights playing sweet music to her lover, was hidden beneath folds of linen too.

"Come up to my room, Frank," said Constance, when she had greeted her lover in the drawing-room, "it doesn't look very inviting here."

"What is the meaning of it all, Connie?" asked the young man, when the two had reached the boudoir.

"It means that we are going away. Now, don't look dull, Frank, we are not

going to the other end of the world, we are merely returning to Avondale Castle. Poor grandma is not at all well. I think there is something troubling her. Still, she offered to stay in town for my sake till quite the end of the season."

"That would mean another fortnight," said Frank dubiously. As he spoke, visions of daily visits to Constance during that fortnight filled his mind, and made him heave a sigh.

"Frank."

"Yes, darling."

"Grandma means to make that fortnight up to me. She is going to invite some people to Avondale, you amongst the number."

"Do you mean it?"

"Of course I do. And who do you

think will be there too? Why, Alice Greybrook—the tall, grave young lady who was at school with me at Frankfort, and who used to deliver to me such long lectures whenever I stole out in secret to meet you! She has been for a short time in a convent, and although she is quite rich, and of very good family, she intends to devote her life to nursing the sick, and all that sort of thing. She is coming over really to nurse poor grandma, but she will be such a companion to me. I love her so much more because she knows you, and will be able to talk about you."

"But she disapproves of me very much!"

"She *did* disapprove of you," said Constance, correcting him, "when she

saw that we were falling in love with one another without the consent of our friends. Alice is so good; she would never countenance anything which she felt to be wrong."

"And when is this paragon to come over?"

"She *is* over; she is waiting for us now at Avondale. We start to-night; you will follow in a fortnight, I expect, when we have other guests. Well, are you satisfied?"

"I suppose so, dearest; but I should be much better satisfied if I could take my little love by the hand and say right boldly, 'behold my wife!'"

She smiled, and tears started to her eyes.

"You love me, Frank?" she said.

"I love you!"

"You do not feel as my father did when, when—— "

"Constance!"

"Ah! forgive me, I will never talk so again; but I cannot bear to think that you could be untrue. If it were so I should never believe in a human soul again!"

This was the last day spent by Frank with his cousin in town. Shortly afterwards Mrs. Meason started with her granddaughter to spend the autumn recess at Avondale Castle.

The castle itself was a princely place, fitted in every way to belong to a member of the British aristocracy; indeed, rumour had it that it had once been the home of a nobleman who occupied a very high position in English society, who had lived not wisely but too well, and as a con-

sequence had been in very low water indeed, when Mr. Meason, returning from India loaded with wealth, had, at his wife's instigation made an offer for the estate and the dwelling, and had forthwith become the happy possessor of both. It was situated in the parish of Avondale, a quaintly picturesque spot set on the edge of the sea, and inhabited mainly by fisher folk.

In the old days, that is to say in the days remembered by those of the inhabitants who had relinquished the arduous occupation of fishing for the more congenial and lighter one of mending nets, Avondale Castle had borne the same relation to Avondale as Buckingham Palace does to London, while the mistress of it held sway as a veritable queen.

The oldest inhabitants remembered the days of the last tenant, and during the winter nights, when the wind was whistling around the huts, and the waves were breaking with a heavy roar upon the sand, they loved to sit in the ingle and tell of the wonders they had seen, of the wonderful stud of horses which had been kept, of the ladies and gentlemen who had come down in the shooting season. After that, a change had come; he whose reign was over passed away into space as completely as if he had never been, and the newly widowed Mrs. Meason came with her lovely daughter to take possession of the estate. Her husband had lived to complete the purchase—no longer. A period of quiet followed all this merry-making.

A large retinue of servants still filled the castle; a number of horses and carriages were kept, but owing to the loss which both mother and child had sustained, no guests were invited to the house. The two women lived alone. After this the Castle was never the same. Indeed, by the superstitious it was averred that since it had passed out of the hands of the original owner persistent ill-fortune had hung like a cloud above it.

For when the season of mourning had passed gaieties began again; but these, which lasted for a short season, were followed by the terrible tragedy of the girl's death.

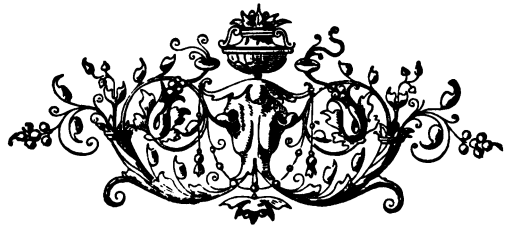
After this no attempt was made to establish happiness within those gloomy walls. For a few years the mother, a

weary, broken-hearted woman, dwelt with her little granddaughter in the stately old place; then even these two had fled. Constance, who was but eight years of age, had been sent to school in France, while her grandmother sought relief in constant change of scene.

They never returned to the Castle; the retinue of servants was dismissed, the horses were sold, and the building was left in charge of a man and his wife, whose duty it was to keep the furniture from mouldering, the rooms from being destroyed by damp and decay. Thus it was that Avondale Castle passed from a happy abode into a kind of ruin, a gloomy addition to the landscape. It was not a spot frequented by tourists, but now and again one came that way, and to these there was

always a villager to point out Avondale Castle, to tell its history, and to show the marble cross which marked the young Countess's resting-place in Avondale Churchyard.

It had become so established a fact to regard the Castle as a ruin that when the news came that the family was about to return to it scarcely a soul in the village would credit the fact. The report was soon substantiated, however, by the arrival of a retinue of servants; then a number of workmen appeared, and in a very short time the Castle was in every way fit for the reception of its mistress.



CHAPTER V.

CHAPTER V.

THE secret which Mrs. Meason had insisted upon had been so rigorously kept that when Lady Constance, with her grandmother, arrived at Avondale, not a soul knew of that young lady's engagement to her cousin. All the world did know was, that the Castle, which since the death of the young Countess of Seafield had been sealed up like a sepulchre, was once more to be thrown open, and filled with a social throng. The sunlight was admitted into the dreary rooms; the faded hangings and tapestries were shaken out, and bright light and life seemed to have risen again

within those dreary walls. It was as if the spirit of the young Countess had returned from the grave to live once again that joyous life which had been hers in those early days in Avondale, before the Earl came to woo her for his wife.

Many living in the village remembered those days well, and also the tragedy which had followed them, and those who had seen and known had felt great pity for the mother who, in a few short weeks, had had her hair turned white and her face heavily lined with sorrow, small wonder it seemed to them that the stately old castle should have been closed, and all pleasure excluded from its walls. Since the heart of the mistress was dead, it was but fitting that the house should be like a tomb. But when once more the rooms were opened,

and the drama of life seemed about to begin anew, the wiseacres shook their heads and felt more pity than envy for the young girl who was to play the leading part in this new act of the human tragedy.

No whisper of these gloomy forebodings reached Constance's ears; but for one thing her cup of happiness would have been full. Often, in the solitude of her room, she thought over the story which her lover had told her, and at such times her soul grew very sad; at first, indeed, she had felt impelled to take the side of her grandmother against the Howarths, but a moment's reflection convinced her of the folly of this; the real culprit had been her own father, and since he was dead, would it not be better that all animosity should be buried too? Hatred and revenge were

two passions utterly unknown to her; her heart expanded with love and kindness to everyone.

"The world is very beautiful," she thought.

It was a bright morning several days after her arrival at her country home. With her arm linked in that of her school-fellow, she was standing at the window of her boudoir, looking at the prospect which surrounded the castle. The old building, with its modern additions, stood on a wooded eminence, looking across a wild park, on the distant sea.

"The world is very beautiful," she added, repeating her thought aloud.

"Yes," answered her companion, dreamily, "it is beautiful to those who are happy, but when the heart is not

glad how soon the world changes, Constance!"

The speaker was a girl of twenty, tall and slim, with a singularly pale face, an abundance of golden hair, and large, dreamy eyes. The singularity of her appearance was heightened by her dress, which was of black cashmere, quaintly cut, and ornamented merely by a large ivory cross, which she wore upon her breast. She and Lady Constance having met at school, had been drawn together by some subtle influence which neither could explain, and had since remained firm friends. Both physically and mentally they were opposed; perhaps it was this very fact which cemented their friendship. Constance always looked to her friend for guidance, and was con-

tent to be treated as a spoiled and petted child.

Constance withdrew her gaze from the sea, and looked at her friend.

"How grave you are, Alice," said she; "you are an enigma to me. It seems so strange that one so young and pretty should deliberately devote her time to nursing the sick, and wish for nothing better than to end her days in a convent. Now if I had shown predilections of that kind it would have been less surprising."

"Why?"

"Because the life which I was compelled to lead during my childhood would have admirably qualified me for a nun. Up to the age of ten, I never knew any home but this, and Avondale Castle was not then what it is to-day; nearly all the

rooms were closed, and I used to think they were haunted. It was like living in a tomb."

Her companion looked at her in wonder. She had become very serious, and her eyes were filled with tears.

"Constance," said she, "were the days of your childhood so very unhappy that the memory of them makes you cry?"

"They were not happy days," said Constance sadly; "I remember as vividly as if it were yesterday wandering about the park, and wondering why children were born, since the world was so solitary."

"But your grandmother—surely she loved you?"

"I think she did—in fact, I am sure she did—but she showed her love in a pe-

culiar way. She used to treat me very sternly. Her own daughter—my dear, dear mother—had been so petted and caressed during her childhood that when she found herself wedded to a man who treated her with indifference, if not cruelty, it broke her heart."

This time the tears which had been suffusing Constance's eyes, rolled slowly down her cheeks. Her companion put her arm around her shoulders in a tender, caressing way, and said quietly:

"Your mother died here, did she not, Constance? In Avondale Castle, I mean."

"I believe so, though grandma has never spoken of it to me. I was three weeks old when she died, and grandma thought if she brought me up severely I should grow into a cold, hard-hearted

woman, incapable of loving very deeply, and able to bear indifference and insult without breaking my heart. But she was quite wrong. I felt my stern training very keenly. I remember I used to cry bitterly night after night, because I had nothing to love and caress, and because I believed there was no one in the world to care for me. I think my heart would have broken if I had not one day found something to care for."

"What was that, dear?"

"A little dog. I found it when it was quite a puppy, and forthwith made it mine. It was one day when I escaped from the thraldom of my governess and crept out to roam alone in the solitude of Avondale Park. The poor little thing had strayed from its home, and was

evidently starving. When I came upon it it was lying upon its side, breathing feebly, and uttering pitiful little cries. I lifted it from the ground and clasped it in my arms. As I did so it licked my cheek; then, with a feeble cry, its head was pressed against my face. Alice, never to my dying day shall I forget the feeling which took possession of me when this poor little dumb creature gave me that caress; it was the first time in my life that anything had exhibited towards me affection of any kind, and all the pent-up love in my heart went out to this little dog! To part from him now was impossible; yet if I carried him openly into the house I knew we should inevitably be separated, for my grandmother disliked dumb animals, dogs

especially. I determined to let no one know of his existence, but to smuggle him into the house and keep him there all to myself. Well, I did so. I conveyed him secretly to one of those rooms in the west wing, which no one ever entered, and nursed him so well that he soon recovered and grew quite strong and pretty. And how he loved me! I used to spend several hours of every day with him, and all the time he was caressing me, but one day when I entered the room there was no little pet to receive me. I looked, and found him lying on his cushion. I spoke to him; he did not move. An unaccountable terror seized me. I knelt on the floor, I lifted him from his bed, clasping the little body in my arms."

She paused, but her companion had grown interested.

"Tell me, dear, what followed," said she.

"Well," continued Constance, "when I opened my eyes I was laying upon my bed, my grandmother was bending over me The first thing I did was to ask for my dog. She told me it was dead. 'Dead?' I repeated; then a dreadful feeling of desolation crept about my heart, and I cried bitterly. I was never reprimanded, as I expected to be, for having kept the little creature in secret; indeed, I was treated with more consideration than heretofore. My lessons were stopped, and I was continually with my grandmother, who watched me curiously. One day she called me to her. 'Constance,' she said, in a tone more tender

than she had ever used before, 'why are you so unhappy, my child? Is it because you have lost that dog?' 'Yes,' I replied, unable to repress my childish sobs. 'I am sorry he is dead, for I loved him—Oh, Grandma, I loved him so much!' 'You loved him!' she repeated, in a voice from which all tenderness had fled; then, taking my hand, she added, 'Will you remember, my child, that a great love means a great sorrow; those are happiest who avoid both. I have your welfare at heart, and I pray to God you may never be tempted to love again.'"

"What strange words!"

"Were they not? At the time I looked at her and wondered what they meant, for I could not understand. Well, three days later I left Avondale Castle and went

abroad. At the time I was perfectly ignorant of what this change meant, but some time later I learned that my grandmother, alarmed at the disastrous effect a solitary life had had upon me, determined to try a change. She took me to a school in Germany. I remained there for a year, thinking much of my little pet, for my love for him had been deep, and my regret was enduring. At the end of the year, two months of which I had spent with my grandmother, I was removed to another school, and surrounded by fresh scenes and unfamiliar faces. This course of conduct was repeated; at the end of every year I found myself with new associations, and was compelled to break with the old ones, until about a year ago I went to Frankfort and met you."

"And we became friends, did we not?"

"Yes. I have often wondered why it was that we were drawn so much together. Of course, it was natural that I should love you, for you are so good and noble; but I cannot understand why it was that you should care for me."

"There was something in your face, Constance, which appealed to my heart, and drew me irresistibly towards you."

"You have always been so good to me," said Constance, "and now I love you more than ever, because I was with you the first time I ever saw Frank. Do you remember that day?" continued the girl, dwelling lovingly upon every word, "when you and I, having lost ourselves in the forest, came upon a young gentleman, who, in the most courtly manner possible, conducted

us back to the seminary? Oh, I can recall as vividly as if it had occurred but yesterday that little scene which took place when we drew near home. He asked our names; you drew me towards you as if to protect me from his admiring glance, and replied with tremendous dignity, 'We thank you for your courtesy, sir, and wish you good-bye.' But it seemed to me that you were too reserved, so I replied, 'I am Lady Constance Howarth,' and then after a very few words we discovered that we were cousins. After that, I met him in secret every day, then you discovered this and lectured me; afterwards, at your express entreaty, I wrote to grandma, telling her that I had met my cousin, and that I loved him very dearly, and that he loved me."

"And on receipt of that letter she came over and took you from the school."

"Yes; but when we had been three day in London, Frank appeared and asked me to be his wife. Oh, the scenes which followed! Grandma was pitiless to us both. First she refused to listen to him; then she bade me swear that I would never see him again. But I could not do it. I had learned to love him too well. . . . All that is passed," concluded the girl. "I am now engaged to Frank with grandma's consent, so for the future all will be well."

"We will hope so, dear," said her friend, as she kissed her tenderly.



CHAPTER VI.

CHAPTER VI.

FOR three days after the return of the family to Avondale Castle nothing of any moment occurred; life went on evenly and pleasantly enough to the young, while a burden of sorrow seemed to fall upon the shoulders of one woman alone—the mistress of the house.

Since her return to Avondale Castle Mrs. Meason had been a changed woman; from no apparent cause her strength gave way; she spent most of her time in her room alone, dispensing even with the society of Miss Greybrook, who had come over with the special object of attending to her; to

no one would she own that she was ill; from no one would she encourage sympathy.

"Leave me to myself," she said, wearily, to Constance; if I husband my strength now, I shall be the better able to entertain my guests!"

And Constance, knowing that any remonstrance would be useless, quietly did as she was told, and fell to thinking of the time when her lover would be again by her side. Mrs. Meason, yielding to her granddaughter's wish, had invited a party to Avondale; in a fortnight the guests would arrive, and already active preparations were being made for their reception. Constance grew brighter and happier as each day went by, knowing that she was coming nearer and nearer to the time of

Frank's arrival. One morning she rose feeling unusually bright, and entered the breakfast-room singing a verse of a lively song. Miss Greybrook, who had already taken her seat at the table, looked up with strangely-troubled eyes.

"Constance," she said; "don't."

"Don't what, Alice?" said the girl, taking her seat at the table.

"Dont be so joyous; it sounds unnatural!"

Constance looked at her friend, and saw that her face was strangely troubled.

"Is anything the matter, Alice?" she asked; then she added quickly: "Yes, I know there is, and I know what it is. Your life is too dreary. When you are not with grandma, you are in the oratory, surrounded by religious emblems. It is

not the life for a young girl; you should come more into the sunshine."

Alice did not reply, but during the breakfast she looked at Constance again and again with troubled, questioning eyes; when the meal was over, she rose and said:

"Will you come out with me this morning? I want to talk to you!" Constance gladly consented, and the two girls went out together. Once out of sight and hearing, Alice turned to her friend.

"Constance, I am going back to France," she said.

"Alice!"

"Your grandmother does not require me; in a few days the house will be full, and my presence can be easily dispensed with. There is an opening in the convent

for a nursing sister; I am going to take it!"

"And you can sacrifice yourself so! Oh, Alice; it is dreadful! Remember, you are only twenty, just beginning life; and if you wished your life might be a very happy one!"

"And will it not be happy?" returned the girl. Is it not the life I have longed for—to minister to the sick, to soothe the sorrowful, to give help to the needy? Constance, dear, I want you to promise me before I go that if ever you are in trouble or need of help you will seek it at my hands!"

"I do not understand!" said Constance. "I in trouble? You forget all my trouble is passed."

"God grant it may be," returned the

girl, fervently. "But, Constance, you saw a while ago that I was sad? I *was;* but it was on your account, not mine."

"On my account?"

"Yes; there is some trouble in store for you. I know it, for I have had such a strange dream! Oh, if I could only shake the recollection of it away! But I cannot. It haunts me, and all day I hear a voice whispering in my ear, 'Save her! save her!"

Her face had grown deathly pale, and she trembled violently. She pressed her thin white hand upon her eyes, as if to shut out some terrible vision.

"Constance," she said, suddenly taking her companion's hand and looking earnestly into her face, "promise me, swear to me, that when sorrow threatens

you you will summon me instantly to your side."

For a moment the girls looked earnestly into each other's eyes. Then Constance sighed, as if released from some terrible spell.

"You terrify me," she said, "and all because you have had a foolish dream."

"It is no ordinary dream, Constance. It has come to me, not once, but many times. I know that you will one day require me, and I beg of you, when that time comes, to let me help you."

Constance did not at once reply. The feeling of apprehension which had been aroused in her by the strange nature of the conversation had passed away, and she felt inclined to make light of the prophecy of her friend. It was but

natural, she said to herself, that a girl who at the age of twenty could look forward with pleasure to the life of a *religieuse* should have strange, unearthly fancies, and wild dreams, induced by melancholy brooding. Surely such fancies and dreams could not be premonitions? Was not she, Constance Howarth, about to be married to the man whom she loved best in all the world?

As Constance turned to answer her friend she was amazed to see that Alice was as pale as death; her eyes were fixed not upon Constance, but beyond her, and Constance, turning quickly, started and turned pale too.

Close to them stood a short, powerfully-built man, with a swarthy skin, piercing black eyes and bushy eyebrows, and

coal-black hair thinly sprinkled with grey. His figure, though powerful, was elegant, and his dress that of a gentleman. He stood smiling, his eyes fixed with an admiring look upon Constance herself, who, meeting this look, grew confused.

"I fear, madam, I have alarmed you," he said, speaking with a strong foreign accent, and removing his hat.

Alice, usually ready enough with a reply, was dumb, so Constance, conquering the strange feeling which almost overcame her, said:

"The grounds are private, sir. We thought we were alone!"

The gentleman bowed again most profoundly.

"Of that I am aware," he replied, "and

I offer you a thousand pardons for the intrusion. I was passing through the neighbourhood, and curiosity led me towards the Castle, which I believed to be untenanted. May I ask if I am addressing its mistress?"

"No; it belongs to my grandmother, Mrs. Meason."

"And your name is—if I may make so bold?"

"Lady Constance Howarth," was the cold reply.

He drew out a card-case, and handed her a card with another profound bow, and a look of increased admiration.

"Will you give Mrs. Meason that card? I have the pleasure of knowing her very slightly. By-and-bye I shall ask permission to renew her acquaintance, and

perhaps, if you will suffer me, to make yours."

So saying, he raised his hat, made a last profound obeisance to both ladies, and walked slowly away.

Constance looked at the card, and read on it the stranger's name:

"THE DUKE D'AZZEGLIO."

In the corner was printed the address of the Spanish Embassy.



CHAPTER VII.

CHAPTER VII.

AT dinner that evening Lady Constance told her grandmother of her meeting with the Duke d'Azzeglio.

"Do you know him, grandma?" she asked.

Mrs. Meason answered in the affirmative, and seemed indeed not at all ill pleased at the knowledge of the Duke's presence in Avondale.

"Where is he staying?" she asked.

"I don't know; he gave me his card, but there is no address upon it."

"Did he say if he thought of remaining here long?"

"No, he did not."

"I hope you asked him to call, Constance."

"I am afraid I did not, grandma. To tell the truth, I was rather startled by his sudden appearance, and did not recover myself until he was gone. Besides, when he said he knew you, I am afraid I almost doubted his word; he had previously asked me if *I* were the mistress of the Castle."

"It is many years since I saw him; he imagined, no doubt, that I was in my grave. I wish you had been more polite, Constance; it is pleasant to see an old friend."

"Well, you will certainly see him, grandma; he did not wait for an invitation. In a few days he will call to

renew your acquaintance and make mine —that was how he put it."

The old lady looked pleased.

"And when he does comes, Constance," she said, "I hope you will atone for your rudeness."

"Well, I will try, though I hope I was not rude. I was certainly startled; he probably saw that and made excuses for me."

"The Duke is a foreigner, is he not, madame?" asked Alice, who during the above conversation had been carefully watching the faces of her companions.

"He is a Spaniard," replied Mrs. Meason. "But his nationality counts for nothing. He is as much English as Spanish—as much French as either. He

has been everywhere and knows everything. A most interesting man."

Then the conversation was changed, and nothing more was said about the Duke.

Two days later Alice Greybrook took her departure from Avondale, and returned to her convent home in France. Constance accompanied her friend as far as the station. On her return to the Castle she was informed by the footman that her grandmother wished to see her in the drawing-room; she went, and found Mrs. Meason entertaining none other indeed than the Duke d' Azzeglio.

Since her first meeting with him, and the conversation concerning him which had taken place at the dinner table, the memory of the Duke's existence had

passed completely from Lady Constance's mind; she was, therefore, neither glad nor sorry to see him; but she received him courteously as became her, since he was her grandmother's old friend. The Duke, on the other hand, made no attempt to conceal the satisfaction he felt in being once more in the company of the girl. He was delighted, he said, to find that she was so nearly related to a lady for whom he had the greatest respect and admiration—here he bowed to Mrs. Meason—he hoped that this fact alone would ensure their becoming better known.

"My grandmother's friends are mine I hope, my lord duke," replied Constance coldly.

Why she spoke coldly she did not know; perhaps instinct told her it would

be better in holding converse with a man like the Duke d'Azzeglio; or the soft inflection of his voice, as he addressed her, may have caused her to assume a haughtiness which was not shown to her most intimate friends. Five minutes later, however, Constance's haughtiness was gone; she listened with interest when the Duke spoke, and talked to him without restraint.

He was, as Mrs. Meason had said, a well-informed man. He had travelled widely, had seen much, and knew how to talk of what he had seen; he interested the girl so deeply in his conversation that when he rose to go, and Mrs. Meason expressed a wish that he would come again, Constance cordially echoed her grandmother's words. The Duke smiled.

"I hope I may soon have the honour of receiving you as my guests," he said, bowing to both ladies. "For the present I am a resident in Avondale. I have taken Lord Foley's house; do you know it?"

"Yes, do you remain long, my lord?" asked Mrs. Meason.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Circumstances will decide that for me, madame." As he spoke he bowed over Mrs. Meason's hand, but contrived to glance at Lady Constance, who, however, was not looking his way. When she gave him her hand he raised it courteously to his lips.

At the door his horse stood awaiting him; as he vaulted into the saddle and took the reins in his hand he seemed like

another being, so changed was he from the gentle, courtly gentleman who had bowed over the ladies' hands five minutes before. The horse was restive; he used the curb until the poor animal quivered with pain. The dog, a spotted Dane, which galloped beside him, annoyed him with its joyous bark.

He stopped his horse, bent in his saddle, and called the dog to him; the creature, terrified by the look of his master's eye crept quivering to the horse's side, then while looking up with eyes full of pleading fear he received a cut which almost blinded him; he lay for a time panting and groaning in the road, while the Duke rode slowly on.

This visit to the Castle was the prelude

to many others. During the few days which followed the Duke found several opportunities of presenting himself at Avondale Castle, while on one occasion the ladies, yielding to his urgent wish, drove down to the country seat which he occupied and partook of luncheon with him.

The Duke was very gracious that day, to both ladies, but he contrived to show some special attention to Constance, which attention she would most certainly have noticed had she not been so continually absorbed in thinking of her lover; as it was she accepted his attentions merely as the ordinary courtesies of everyday life.

But Mrs. Meason, who was less absorbed, and whose eyes were keen, felt

profoundly satisfied as she saw the Duke's gaze wander continually towards the girl.

"Have you taken the house for any time?" asked Constance, when she had walked with the Duke to view the conservatories and grounds.

"For some time," he observed, "and now I hope I shall be able to remain."

"But you are all alone here; will you not find it dull?"

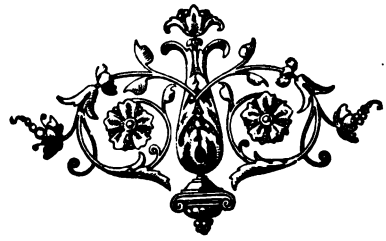
He smiled.

"I may find dulness a pleasant change. I lead a busy life in town. But to-day you have been good enough to relieve my dulness. I hope you will honour me with your company again."

"My grandmother is not strong enough to go out often," returned the girl, "but

she will always be pleased to see you at the Castle, I am sure."

Thus the Castle doors were thrown open to him. He was glad. Whenever he entered those doors he was pretty sure to find himself sooner or later in the company of Lady Constance.



CHAPTER VIII.

CHAPTER VIII.

AFTER the departure of her old school-fellow for the Continent Constance was not left long alone. She was provided with another companion in the shape of the Countess of Seaforth. The Countess, who, with her husband in her train, arrived one day at Avondale Castle, was of a very different type to Alice Greybrook. She was small and very pretty, with an abundance of golden hair, which her enemies said was dyed, and a lovely complexion, which rumour averred was carefully compounded. She looked twenty-five, though she had been a wife for fifteen years, and

had contrived to break several hearts before she finally consented to make one man happy. Few spoke well of her, yet everyone sent her invitations, for no gathering was deemed complete without her; she was *par excellence* a woman of the world, and for that very reason she had been chosen by Mrs. Meason for Lady Constance's *chaperone*, and under the Countess's protecting wing Lady Constance had made her first entrance into London society. She was a favourite *chaperone*, since she had never been known to fail in procuring eligible partners for her *débutantes*. When the tall and stately Lady Constance Howarth made her appearance in society by the pretty little Countess's side, everybody anticipated that the girl would make a brilliant match.

They were accordingly amazed when at the close of the season, Lady Constance, accompanied by her grandmother, retired to the country without having received an engagement ring.

"You have quite injured my reputation, dear," said the Countess.

She was sitting in Lady Constance's boudoir, sipping tea out of egg-shell china. She was dressed in a loose robe of white cashmere, which became her wonderfully, and her golden hair fell in heavy masses to her waist; her pale blue eyes were dreamily regarding Lady Constance, who, dressed in her riding habit, was presiding over the gipsy table on which stood the tea. On arriving at Avondale an hour before, the Countess had declared herself to be half dead with

fatigue, and had accordingly been transported, with her maid, her two dogs and her luggage, to her own apartments. Once there, however, her fatigue disappeared. She exchanged her travelling dress for her *peignoir*, let down her hair, and leaving her maid to finish the unpacking, went herself to have a chat with Lady Constance.

"Yes," repeated the Countess dreamily, settling herself comfortably in her chair, "you have quite injured my reputation, Constance. Everybody declares I flirted myself with all the eligible *partis*, and never gave you a chance of marrying one."

"Then they are quite wrong," said Constance with a smile, "you did your very best for me—indeed, I was quite afraid

you would marry me off without so much as 'by your leave.'"

"By the way, Constance, what has become of that handsome cousin of yours? Do you know I was quite afraid you were going to fall in love with him!"

"Were you?" said Constance with a smile.

"Indeed, I was. Do you remember the night of Lady Codrington's ball? I feigned a headache in order to get you away."

"You feigned it?"

"Of course I did—and admirably my little ruse succeeded. I shall never forget the young hero's look of disgust when I took you from him. Poor fellow!"

"Why, poor fellow?" said Constance.

"Because he is a soldier," replied the Countess sentimentally, "and will be sure to get his throat cut one of these days. That reminds me. Our troops are going out to fight the Zulus. Is our handsome cousin going with them to fight for his country, and cover himself with glory by losing a limb? . . . Good gracious, Constance, what is the matter?"

The girl's cheeks grew deathly pale, and her hands trembled violently. She fixed her dark eyes anxiously upon her companion's face, and said in an eager, tremulous voice:

"Did you say, Lady Seaforth, that war is declared, and that our troops have been ordered out to fight?"

"Assuredly, my dear, but that need not send you into hysterics."

"Then Frank is going," continued Constance. "I am sure of it, though he has not said so. He was to have paid us a visit—we expected him to-day by the train which brought you. Instead of coming he sent a letter by the guard of the train, saying that important business would detain him in town for two days longer; at the end of that time he hoped to join us in Avondale."

This time the Countess said nothing, but she thought a great deal. In those few words Constance had unconsciously revealed the true state of her heart, and the Countess watching her, thought it would be rather a good thing if, as Constance feared, Frank Howarth was one of the troops ordered into action. For a few moments neither of the ladies spoke.

Constance, still very pale and agitated, was reading a letter which she had taken from the pocket of her riding habit; while the Countess, who was in reality watching her companion, pretended to sip her tea and play with the two little Maltese dogs by her side; presently Constance returned the letter to her pocket, and the Countess spoke.

"You say your cousin will be here in a couple of days, dear?"

"Yes."

"And in the meantime, darling, what are we to do to amuse ourselves? Is there anyone staying in the house or in the neighbourhood who will make the time pass pleasantly till our handsome hero arrives?"

"You and Lord Seaforth are at present

the only guests we have in the house. Our sole acqaintance in the neighbourhood is the Duke d'Azzeglio."

The Countess started.

"Whom did you say, Constance?"

"The Duke d'Azzeglio."

"Do you mean the Spanish Ambassador?"

"Yes; do you know him?"

"My dear, who does *not* know him? A few seasons ago he was the rage, like any fashionable beauty. His wealth is enormous, and he is *so* clever. He could have married anyone, from a princess downwards, yet at the end of the season he was without a wife."

"He is still without one," said Constance.

"Do you know the Duke, dear?"

"Very slightly; he is an old friend of grandma's and he has been several times to see her. He dines with us this evening."

"What time do we dine?"

"At eight o'clock."

The Countess was on her feet in a moment.

"It is seven now," she said, glancing at the clock on the chimney-piece, "and we have been chattering away without a thought of dinner. I must positively go and dress. What will you wear to-night, Constance?"

"White, I think," replied the girl, carelessly.

"Yes? Well, white is always becoming; but you are just a trifle pale to-night, love. Will you have the least touch of rouge?"

"No," replied Constance, shrinking away.

"Well," perhaps you are right," said the Countess, philosophically; "men see so much rouge nowadays, that it is perhaps as well to give them a change; and they love change. *Au revoir*, my darling."

And the Countess, leaving a sickly odour of perfume behind her, hurried off to her own apartments, followed by her two little dogs.

She was excited; she was like a war-horse, when, after a few months of quiet grazing in lonely fields, it hears again the distant boom of cannon, and sees the sabres flashing in the sun. The Countess was by nature a match maker, and her very soul, such as it was, was in her

work. She had been disgusted at her non-success with Lady Constance; she was eager to retrieve her blunder, and here was an opportunity. If she could marry her *protégée* to the Duke d'Azzeglio her triumph would be great indeed. And why not accomplish this thing? As far as she could see, the only obstacle to be fought against was Constance's evident love for her cousin. But was this an obstacle? Had not hundreds of girls who fancied themselves in love, as Constance did, been cured of their youthful folly, and lived to thank their guardians, who, heedless of their cries and protestations, had married them to eligible partners, and so had ensured their comfort for life? Had not she, the Countess of Seaforth, whom everybody believed to be incapable of love

for anyone but herself, passed through her own season of romance? Had she not had sweet meetings—hours of bliss, and nights of misery, until her romance was summarily put a stop to by her mother, who married her to the Earl of Seaforth?

"Of course, if I had been left to make my own selection," said the Countess, in telling her story one day to Lady Constance, "I should most certainly have married my hero, and repented of my folly afterwards."

"Then you could not have loved him," Constance had returned.

"Quite wrong, my dear. I loved him to distraction," returned the Countess. "I used to think I would walk about barefooted if I could only be with him. Of course it was very silly, and I am very

thankful now that mamma discovered all the nonsense and ended it."

This conversation was recalled to the Ccuntess while she was plotting for what she believed to be the girl's good.

"I am very happy with Seaforth," she said to herself, "and Constance will be very happy with the Duke. It is a lucky thing this young man is her cousin. If he doesn't get shot down in battle, poor fellow, he will be a nice companion for her—after her marriage."

So while her maid's hands were busy she herself was building castles in the air. By the time she was ready to descend and meet the Duke, she had fully resolved that it should be no fault of hers if Constance did not ultimately become the Duchess d'Azzeglio.

Meanwhile Constance was thinking, but in a very different strain. As soon as she found herself alone she took out the letter which she had received from Frank that day, and read it again.

"My own darling Constance," he wrote, "I am just sending you a line. If I write in a miserable strain, don't think anything of it. I feel pretty miserable to-day. Are the fates particularly set against *us*, or does the course of true love never run smooth? The day you left town, if you remember, I begged and prayed of Mrs. Meason to allow me to accompany you; she refused. 'In a fortnight,' she said icily, 'when my other guests arrive at Avondale, I shall be pleased to see you.' Well, Connie, I have lounged away that

fortnight, I have had nothing whatever to do. I have lounged at the club, ridden in the Row, gone to the Opera, and all the time I have been thinking of you, longing to be with you, and always looking forward to the hour of our meeting. Well, Connie, the fortnight, which has seemed like a year to me, has come to an end, so also has the period of my idleness. Just at the hour when I should be coming to you, duty keeps me in town, and I am afraid duty will claim me for some time to come. Adieu, my darling, God keep you well and happy till we meet.

"Ever your loving

"FRANK.

"P.S. — There is a possibility of my getting a day, in that case I shall run down."

Constance read the letter carefully through; as she did so her face grew paler, and her eyes more terrified. Was it possible, she asked herself, that Lady Seaforth was right? Could it be that Frank, her lover, was to be called out to fight, to be wounded, and perhaps left to meet a terrible death among the dead on the field of battle?

"Oh! it is a terrible world," she exclaimed, pacing the room in wild agitation; there is no happiness in it, it is all misery and despair."

A tap at her door recalled her to herself. "Come in," she said, and her maid entered.

"Did your ladyship ring?" asked the girl, who had been waiting for the summons to dress her mistress for dinner.

"I did not ring, but you had better put out my things," said Constance wearily.

The maid did as she was desired, while Constance sat down at her escritoire and wrote out the following telegram:

"From Constance Howarth to Captain Howarth.—Your letter has terrified me. Are you going to the war? For heaven's sake, write or come!"

She gave the telegram to her maid, with directions to send it instantly.

The girl retired, but in less than five minutes she was back again, busily dressing her mistress for dinner.

Constance wore white. It was Frank's favourite colour, therefore she loved it. She selected for that evening, then, a long, clinging robe of white satin, which, being sleeveless and cut low, revealed her neck

and arms, which were perfect. She fastened a diamond collarette about her throat and a small spray of diamonds in her bodice, while from the heavy masses of her dark hair shone several diamond stars.

She was certainly rather pale, and her dark eyes looked wistful and very sad. When she entered the drawing-room Lady Seaforth, glancing up from the depths of her easy chair, regretted that her suggestion about the rouge had not been taken, but the Duke d'Azzeglio felt his pulses quicken as he looked at her.

"She is perfect," he said to himself, as she crossed the room with a slow and stately step, and smilingly gave him her hand; "she would make a superb Duchess."

The dinner party was a small one, and, as most of the members of it were sedate, or disinclined for conversation, it proved to be rather dull. Constance was sad and thoughtful. Mrs. Meason, who attributed her dulness to disappointment at the non-arrival of her lover, seemed angry, and tried to talk to the Duke, while he preferred attending to Constance, although she hardly gave him a word, and never once looked at him, Lord Seaforth, a tall, thin, aristocratic-looking man of sixty, who had grown into the habit of leaving all the conversation to his wife, ate his dinner with an appetite, but said nothing, while the Countess rattled away with her usual flow of conversation, and tried very hard to make things seem bright. The little lady had a difficult task, and she was

not at all sorry when she found herself in the drawing-room.

"Constance," said Mrs. Meason, "what is the matter, child?"

"Nothing, grandma."

"Then why do you look so wretched and keep so still? It is not polite to behave so. The Duke was seated beside you, yet you scarcely spoke a word."

"My dear Constance," broke in the Countess, who feared a storm, "how handsome the Duke is!"

"Is he?"

"Do you not think so, dear?"

"Well, no; I don't think he struck me as being a handsome man."

"Then evening dress must be wonderfully becoming to him," continued the little lady. "He is by far the handsomest

man I have seen this season—so much rugged strength about him, coupled with such elegant manners. And then how delightfully calm he is! I shouldn't think he had ever been excited in his life."

Constance, not being particularly interested in these rhapsodies about the Duke, strolled out on to the balcony and remained there, while the Countess went to the piano and began to play.

It was a lovely night. The air was soft and balmy, while a full flood of moonlight fell upon the park and lit up the distant sea.

Constance stood looking at the scene, and thinking of her lover, and listening in a dreamy way to the music which was going on. How long she had been thus she did not know; in dreaming

she had lost all count of time. Suddenly she found she was not alone.

"The air is balmy, but treacherous, and a dinner dress is not sufficient protection against the dews of night. Will you permit me to wrap you in this?"

It was the Duke who spoke. Constance did not answer, but she made a movement so as to allow him to wrap about her shoulders the soft silken cloak which he held. Then she sank into the chair which he placed for her, and he remained standing by her side.

Constance continued to look at the landscape; the Duke looked at her.

"I have interrupted your meditations," said he. "Let me trust your thoughts were not sad ones?"

"I am afraid they were sad," replied the

girl, still looking dreamily at the moonlit trees. "Misery is so mingled with happiness in this world that if we possess one we must accept the other."

"But it is not always so. They come blended together when one is old; but during one's youth—surely happiness is sometimes pure?"

"Sometimes; but how seldom. When you spoke to me just now I was looking at that landscape, which seemed so peaceful; at the moon, regarding me with her cold calm gaze, and I thought she would shine as peacefully, and everything around would seem as calmly happy, even if far away men slain in battle were lying upon the field groaning in the last agonies of death; for all we know, she may be looking upon some scene of terror, even

while she is smiling so peacefully upon us."

"Surely," said he, "scenes of terror are for ever being enacted in some quarter of the globe. Never an hour passes without some human being suffers acutely. But when these things do not affect us, why should we weary ourselves with thinking of them?"

"Because it is just possible to be able to feel for others. Besides, how do we know but sorrow and suffering may soon come our way?"

"You are so young. You should not think of these things."

"Then I should not be worthy to live."

She rose, would have passed him and re-entered the drawing-room, but he detained her.

"Lady Constance, I wish to invite your grandmother's guests to be mine to-morrow. May I count upon you?"

"If you wish it, yes."

This time she did enter the drawing-room. As she passed beneath the gas-light the Duke saw that she was strangely agitated, and that there were tears upon her cheek.

CHAPTER IX.

CHAPTER IX

"LADY SEAFORTH, I cannot go with you to the Duke's to-day," cried Constance the next morning, as she rushed excitedly into her friend's boudoir. Lady Seafield, who was dressed for walking, started and looked amazed.

"My dear Constance, what *is* the matter?"

"Nothing. Frank, my cousin, is coming, that is all, and I am just going off to meet him at the station, therefore I cannot go with you to the Duke's."

"Then *I* cannot go!"

"But you *must* go. Take Lord Seaforth

with you, and make my excuses to the Duke," and without waiting for another word, Constance descended the stairs, entered the brougham which was waiting for her, and was rapidly driven away!

Anyone seeing her now, who had met her on the preceding evening for the first time, would scarcely have believed her to be the same girl. The cold, statuesque figure which had stood upon the balcony with the Duke had been transformed into a living, breathing thing of flesh and blood—a girl all fire and passion, who was capable of loving very deeply when her heart was touched. There was no lack of colour in her cheeks now, no wistful look in her eyes; happiness had come to her unalloyed this time; she was full of a feverish kind of joy.

She reached the station a quarter of an hour before the arrival of the train, and during that time she paced the platform with restless steps. Then the train drew up, the carriage doors flew open, and Frank stepped on to the platform. What a farce was the meeting between the two—how their hearts were beating—how Frank longed to take his cousin in his arms, to kiss her flushed cheek, and charm away the tears which were even then trembling upon her lashes as she raised her eyes lovingly to his face. All he could do, however, was to take her hand, and place it on his arm, and lead her out of the station to the carriage which was to take them up to the Castle. The moment he found himself in the brougham, however, with his cousin by his side, Frank

took her in his arms and kissed her tenderly.

"Well, Connie," said he, "you were right! it is settled, my darling. I am to go away! I have got one day to spend with you: to-night I return to town again, and in a week we start!"

"You are going to Zululand?" said Constance, fixing her eyes earnestly upon him. "You are going into action, Frank?"

"Yes, my darling," returned the young fellow in as light a tone as he could assume; "but that need not alarm you, Constance. It is what one expects when one is a soldier; besides, I have got my position to make. I am not sorry at being called to the front—one thing only distresses me."

"What is that, Frank?"

"The thought of leaving you! At the best it is hard enough to part from those we love; but for me it is terrible. Constance, I have thought of a plan, and I mean to propose it to you. Before I go I want you to become my wife!"

"Your wife?" she repeated.

"Yes, my darling; do you not understand? I want you to marry me before I go, then nothing on earth can come between us."

"But Frank, do you wish me to marry you in secret, and let no one know but you and I?"

"No, Constance, I do not wish that. Hitherto we have been fair and open, let us remain so. Mrs. Meason consented to our engagement, she will consent to our marriage. I don't want to take you from

her; I only wish to feel that no one on earth can take my darling from me."

At this moment the carriage stopped, and the lovers, alighting, entered the Castle.

"We have the house to ourselves to-day, Frank," said Constance, as the two entered the great drawing-room. "Lord and Lady Seafield are out visiting, and grandma always keeps her room until dinner-time."

The lovers remained together for half-an-hour or so. Then Frank, who had been contentedly discussing his marriage scheme, proposed that he should see Mrs. Meason. A message was accordingly sent to that lady, and the answer came. She would be pleased to see Captain Howarth in her boudoir.

Now that the critical momeut had come Constance trembled and grew faint-hearted, but Frank was full of confidence, and with the light of hope and love in his eyes he looked superbly handsome. Mrs. Meason thought this when he appeared in her boudoir; but as she looked at him her face grew cold and hard. She received him courteously, but by no means warmly. He told her of his sudden call to duty, and she expressed a hope that he would earn distinction.

Then Frank made his proposition.

"I wish to make Constance my wife before I go to the war," said he.

For a moment she was silent. What she thought no one could tell; her face was like a marble mask. Frank looked at her inquiringly, and she said:

"What you ask is impossible, quite impossible!"

The answer was so opposed to the one which Frank had anticipated that for a moment he was taken aback.

"Perhaps you misunderstand me?" said he. "I do not wish to take Constance from you, and I am sure she loves you too well to wish to go. All I wish is to feel that I have a wife to strive for, and to return to when my work is done!"

She smiled coldly.

"I understand perfectly," she said. "You wish to bind Constance, while you yourself will remain free. Well, it cannot be. In consenting to your engagement I have already conceded much. You must remember the marriage is not at all a suitable one for my grandchild. Of

course, it is natural that your family should wish it to come about. Young ladies of good family with many thousands of pounds are not to be met with every day; and they do not usually bestow their hands upon penniless younger sons, who come of no better family than themselves."

She paused, and Frank said nothing; the hot blood suffused his face, and he was angrily biting his lip.

"This sudden call to war," she continued, in a tone of conciliation, "may be the means of putting you more on an equality with Constance. You may win distinction, and on your return be altogther in a more suitable position to ask her for your wife!"

Frank bowed and left the room; he

could not trust himself to speak. A few hours later, however, when his anger and indignation had in a measure passed away, he returned to Mrs. Meason and pleaded his cause eloquently. But neither his pleading nor Constance's tears had the least effect in altering a decision which was intended to be final.

CHAPTER X.

CHAPTER X.

"GOOD-NIGHT, my darling, and—good-bye!"

The hour of parting had come and the lovers were alone. They had left the Castle and had crept out to take a last kiss and whisper a last adieu; they stood together on the borders of Avondale Park, with the smoothly kept lawns all around them and the silent sky above. Day had waned, night had come on, but the sky was thickly studded with stars, while above the heads of the lovers was the moon calmly looking down upon them, and wrapping them from head to foot in

her strange mystical light. Constance was still in white and her face was as pale as the dress she wore. Frank looked into her eyes and his tears almost choked him.

"Constance," he said, "won't you speak to me? won't you say something that will cheer me when I am far away? Oh! my darling, now I see what you suffer, I almost curse the day that I ever crossed your path."

"Don't say that, Frank!" returned the girl, passing her hand wearily across her eyes, "you brought me the one great joy of my life."

"And the greatest sorrow!"

The girl sighed wearily.

"When I was a child, my grandmother said to me one day, 'Always remember,

Constance, that a great love means a great sorrow.' At the time I did not understand what she meant. I do not understand it now. Tell me, Frank, why should it be? Why is mankind the enemy of mankind? Why should we be tortured so cruelly? In this world it takes so little to make one happy, yet there are always lips to say 'that little shall not be yours!' It is a cruel world, and yet all might be so different."

"All will be different, my Constance, when I come back."

"When you come back!" she repeated, dreamily, creeping closer to him as she spoke, and laying her weary head upon his shoulder. "Oh, Frank, suppose you never come back to me, suppose we never meet again!"

"Constance!"

"Think what my life has been," continued the girl, "and then tell me if I have any right to hope for the future. Have I ever had happiness except what you brought to me, and now even that is to be torn away? Alice Greybrook was right when she said there was misery for me in the future; well, let it come, and if it kills me I shall not care."

"My darling, you are excited, and you don't know what you say."

"I am quite calm, Frank, now . . . Do you know why I pleaded to my grandmother so earnestly this afternoon—why I begged her on my knees to consent to our marriage? It was not because I dreaded the parting from you, in any case that must have come, but if you had gone

away from me, my husband, as you wished to do, I would have been brave and waited patiently for your return; but now it is different; if you leave me to-night, I am afraid you will never see me again."

"My darling, what do you mean?"

"I mean, and my instinct tells me I am right, that the cruelty which separates us now may keep us for ever asunder . . . Frank, if you love me, take me with you! For Heaven's sake do not leave me here."

"Take you with me? make you my wife in spite of what has passed to-day?"

"In spite of all!" cried the girl earnestly. "I love you, do you hear, Frank, I love you, and to part from you like this is worse than death. I cannot bear it—I *will* not bear it—Oh, my love,

let me go with you. You are going into danger, why should I stay here? Let me be your nurse, your companion, your wife! It is all I ask."

"You love me so much, my darling?—thank God!"

"Did you not know that I loved you—that you were all the world to me? And you will take me with you—you will not leave me here to break my heart?"

She threw her arms about him—he clasped her to him and kissed her passionately.

"You have given me courage *now*, my darling," he cried. "I can go and fear nothing!"

"And you will take me with you?"

"No, Constance—no; that cannot be. A soldier's life is a hard one, and only

fitted for a man. In a few months I shall be with you again!"

"You refuse to take me—you can part from me so—although I implore you to let me go! Then you do not love me as I love you!"

"Constance, for God's sake don't say that—don't tempt me to do a deed which would be unmanly. Even if I married you, my Constance, what would be the result?—we should have to part, for I am called away! No; let us wait patiently—strong in the knowledge of our love for one another. Keep a brave heart, my darling; our time of happiness will come."

Suddenly their interview was brought to an end: the sound of wheels reached them, and Frank knew that the carriage was waiting to take him away.

"Constance," he said softly, "good-bye!" But the girl clung wildly to him.

"You cannot go, Frank—you must not go—I tell you it will kill me!"

"Constance, try to be brave—it is only for a little while—and then we shall be man and wife."

He stooped to kiss her; with a cry she threw her arms about him and fell fainting upon his shoulder.

For several days after the departure of her cousin, Lady Constance was seen by no one. The Duke d'Azzeglio, who called regularly at the Castle, was informed by Mrs. Meason that Lady Constance was slightly indisposed — that she had been imprudent, as young people often are—had walked with her cousin in Avondale Park when the dews of night were falling, and

had taken a cold, which for the time being confined her to her room. By the Duke, who knew nothing whatever of the girl's feelings towards her cousin, this polite fiction was accepted in all good faith; but to the Countess of Seaforth it was necessary to be more explicit. She was told a little —but not all—and, greatly to Mrs. Meason's amazement, she approved of all that had been done.

"In cases of this kind," said the Countess, who, it must be said, erred more from brainlessness than heartlessness, "it is always much better to be firm. Of course, the very idea of Constance marrying a man in Captain Howarth's position is absurd in the extreme; the dear child is romantic, and fancies herself in love—but it will pass away in time."

"You think so?"

"I am sure of it. My dear Mrs. Meason, I have seen dozens of similar cases —every girl has to pass through this ordeal. I have done so myself. I threatened to commit suicide—I have no doubt I should have carried out the threat if I had been allowed to marry the man whom I fancied I loved."

If there had been the slightest inclination on the part of Mrs. Meason to hesitate as to the wisdom of the course she had adopted, that inclination was now gone; the Countess, whom she had hitherto regarded as frivolous, worldly, and somewhat heartless, became in her eyes quite a sensible woman.

"I am glad you are here," said Mrs. Meason; "your presence will be a

comfort to Constance, who shrinks from me."

"Why does she shrink from you?"

"She regards me as her enemy, because I have refused to sanction this engagement."

"Ah! I understand! Dear Mrs. Meason, do not grieve; all will come right in time, believe me."

To all outward appearance the Countess seemed to be right:—A few days later, when the Duke, in answer to a pressing invitation from Mrs. Meason, presented himself at Avondale Castle, he found Constance among the guests, who were assembled in the drawing room waiting for dinner. He was astonished to find her looking almost happy. The cause could be easily accounted for. She had received

that day two letters which brought her happiness, one was from her lover, who had started on his journey, and who wrote to assure her of his well-being, the other from Alice Greybrook, now a duly qualified sister, who had taken up her permanent residence in the convent. The receipt of these letters had brought the girl a certain happiness and contentment.

The dinner passed off pleasantly enough; to the Duke d'Azzeglio it seemed by far the most enjoyable repast he had ever taken within the walls of the Castle. The long dining table was full of guests, but Lady Constance was placed beside the Duke, to whom she chatted pleasantly. When the dinner was over and the ladies retired to the drawing-room, the Duke was the first to follow them, again he sought out

Lady Constance and placed himself beside her. Coffee was served, and in knots of twos and threes the gentlemen gradually strolled in from the dining room, the buzz of conversation went on, the music commenced, and the Duke asked Lady Constance to sing. In a moment the girl turned pale.

"No—no, I cannot sing!" she said.

For as he spoke there flashed across her brain a vision of the happy past, when during those long summer evenings in London she had sat in the drawing-room at Portland Place singing to the man who was now on his way to the seat of war. She could not sing to the Duke d'Azzeglio. The Duke, who was too courteous to press his request, looked and wondered not a little at the sudden change which had taken place in the girl.

For the first time it flashed upon him that there was some mystery which he had not even suspected before. But although the Duke did not press his request, it was not fated that Constance was to escape. The Countess of Seaforth suddenly broke from the ring of admirers surrounding her, and came over to where the girl sat.

"Constance, dearest," she said, "I want you to sing a duet with me!"

Constance shrank away and glanced uneasily at the Duke, who proceeded to make excuses for her.

"Lady Constance will not sing to-night, madame," said he.

The little lady smiled, looked at the Duke, then at Lady Constance, with a world of meaning in her eyes. Con-

stance, catching the look, flushed uneasily, and rose from her seat.

"The Duke asked me to sing just now and I refused," she said hurriedly. "I did not feel well, but I am better now. I will sing the duet, Lady Seaforth."

"But if the Duke does not wish it——" began the Countess, when Constance interrupted her.

"That is not the question," she said hurriedly. "I repeat, when the Duke asked me I was not well. I am better now, and I will sing."

Without waiting for another word she crossed the room, took her seat at the piano, and, in order to hide her excitement, began to play until Lady Seaforth should come with the song she wished to sing. Constance was nervous and

painfully ill at ease. The quiet tone of possession which the Duke had thought fit to assume towards her, and the subsequent looks of the Countess, had opened the girl's eyes as to the true state of affairs, and she determined to show that the little lady was mistaken. "If his grace does not wish it," the Countess had said. What did she mean? She certainly could not think that the Duke would ever have the right to dictate the movements of Lady Constance.

The Countess arrived with the duet. Constance looked at it and trembled violently. It was Frank's favourite song, the very one which the lovers had sung on that night, the very last happy night they had spent together in town. She placed the music before her, she ran her

fingers over the keys of the piano and began to sing. As she did so, the room, the company, everything faded away. She was again in the drawing-room in London—alone, save for the presence of her lover who stood beside her, listening to the tender tones of her voice, and waiting for his time to come. How rich her voice was—its tones were tenderer than ever that night, for her very soul was in them—she was singing, not to the company there, but to Frank, who seemed beside her. Then the Countess, taking her part in the duet, mingled her voice with that of her friend. A few bars were sung by the two together—then both music and singing ceased abruptly. Lady Constance was on her feet, trembling and gasping for air!

What happened after that she did not know; she was dimly conscious of a confused murmuring of voices, then her hand was taken in a firm grip, and she was forcibly led from the room. When she recovered herself she was walking on the lawn in front of the Castle, leaning upon the arm of the Duke d'Azzeglio. She paused, and withdrew her hand from his arm; they could not see each other—it was quite dark, or rather it seemed so to them since their eyes had been so lately dazzled by the brilliant light of the room.

"Shall we return to the house, your grace?" said Constance uneasily.

"If you wish it," he returned. "It would be better, however, to remain a little longer in the air before returning to the drawing-room, the heat of which is

oppressive, and may cause you to faint again."

"It was not the heat which affected me, sir, it was the song."

"Yes?"

"The last time I sang it," continued the girl quietly, "was with my cousin, Captain Howarth, who has gone to the war."

"Ah, I understand."

The two walked up and down for five minutes longer, then they re-entered the house. Constance wished the company good night, and retired at once to her room, whereupon the Duke made his adieux and took his departure.



CHAPTER XI.

CHAPTER XI.

A FORTNIGHT passed, and each day as it came brought with it a round of pleasures to those at the Castle. The Countess of Seaforth, who had constituted herself mistress of the ceremonies, as it were, was for ever working her busy little brain, inventing new amusements for those about her. One day a pic-nic was planned; a large party started off—some on horseback, others in carriages—to enjoy a long drive through the country, and eat their luncheon in the open air. Then there was a marine excursion, when the ladies in their elegant boating dresses were taken

out in the fishing boats, to get a breath of sea air. On those days when the gentlemen wanted sport and went out with the keepers and dogs to beat the Avondale covers, the ladies formed what they termed "ladies' parties," that is to say, each lady amused herself as she wished. If one wished to be alone, to stroll about the castle grounds and read, it was permitted; if two or three liked to form a little party and make an excursion, that also was permitted; and if any gentleman chose to join a "ladies' party," that was permitted too. Mrs. Meason, who usually joined in a general excursion, kept her room on the day of the "ladies' parties"; the Duke d'Azzeglio, on the other hand, was continually present. The cause of his presence rapidly became known; he was paying

very marked attention to Lady Constance.

To the girl herself the knowledge of this fact caused extreme pain and annoyance, and she contrived by every possible means at her command to intimate to the Duke that his persistent attention to her was extremely unwelcome. A closer acquaintance with him had, instead of arousing in her any deeper feelings of friendship for him, caused her to regard him with fear and dislike. He was cruel to dumb animals, unfeeling to his servants, jealous and suspicious of everyone about him. It was very annoying to Constance to be so continually thrust into the company of such a man; yet what could she do?—she could not be rude to her grandmother's guest; worse still, she could not mention

the fact of her engagement to her cousin, since she had vowed solemnly not to do so until she had obtained the express permission of her grandmother. She did the only thing it was possible for her to do—preserved a cold and haughty demeanour, and tried as much as possible to avoid the Duke's society. Now these two things, instead of having the desired effect, only raised her in the Duke's esteem. To be pointedly avoided by a marriageable young lady was so great a novelty to him that he became fascinated, and the more she absented herself from his society the more he sought hers; while in his eyes she was never so alluring as when she assumed that air of hauteur which became her so well.

Things were at this stage when an event

happened which everyone but Constance had foreseen.

One day, about a month after Frank's departure, the gentlemen staying in Avondale Castle formed a party, and went out for the day to shoot the covers. Constance breakfasted in her own room that morning, but about eleven o'clock she came down wearing her boating costume and completely dressed for walking. She hurriedly descended the stairs, passed through the hall, and had gained the door, when she was stopped by the Countess of Seaforth.

"My darling Constance," exclaimed the little lady, suddenly appearing upon the scene, "Where are you going?"

Constance frowned; she was angry; she had hoped to escape from the house unnoticed, and before the arrival of the Duke,

who would be certain to appear by-and-by, and if he met her, offer her his escort; so she replied rather shortly:

"I am going out."

The Countess laughed, she saw the girl's annoyance, but she did not choose to notice it.

"Why of course you are going out, dearest," she said, "but where are you going, and who is going with you?"

"I am going on the sea for a sail in a fishing yawl, and I am going alone."

The Countess shuddered. If there was one thing she disliked it was sailing on the sea in a fishing yawl with those dreadful fishermen near to her. "Of course," she always said, as an excuse for her weakness, "they are charming men in their way, to be looked at through an opera glass, or put

into a painting, but to have them near one smelling of salt and tar was fearful." Then the boats—fishing yawls, as they were called—were not at all suited to the Countess's taste; there were no soft cushions to recline on, no handsome young men in white flannels at the oars, for her to look upon and try the effect of her smiles. A few days after the Countess's arrival at Avondale, a boating party had been planned and the Countess had been asked to join, but she had smilingly refused.

"If you will fill the boat with seal-skins," she replied, "and have those dreadful 'old salts,' as they are called, properly dressed and fumigated before we start, I might be induced to join you, otherwise I cannot."

In choosing a marine excursion, therefore, Constance, who knew her friend's weakness, believed she would have no difficulty in getting away alone. Nor would she, under ordinary circumstances, but now the case was different. The Countess, while longing to return to her sofa and her novel, rose to the occasion, and determined to sacrifice herself on the altar of friendship.

"Will you wait a moment, dear?" she said I really must go with you."

"Are you *sure* you would like to go?" returned Constance; "I thought you disliked boating."

"So I do, dear, and boatmen as well; they are such dreadful, dried-looking creatures, I find myself wondering if they have been pickled and cured, I am sure they

smell like it, but I won't look at them to-day, and I am quite longing for a breath of sea air. In five minutes, dearest, I shall be ready," and without waiting for a word from Constance, the Countess swept up the stairs, and disappeared.

The five minutes had passed into half an hour, yet the Countess was still in her room, and Constance still awaited her in the library; the girl grew impatient; then another half an hour passed, and she fancied she heard the sound of the Countess's voice. She went in search of her, and found her standing in the hall talking to the Duke d'Azzeglio. When Constance came up the Duke smiled, and, bowing low, kissed her hand.

"I came," he said, "to crave the honour of your company to-day. The Countess

tells me you are engaged and cannot lunch with me!"

"We are going on the sea," said Constance, coldly.

"May I have the pleasure of being your escort?"

Constance was about to reply when the Countess interrupted her.

"We shall be charmed, my lord," said she. Whereupon the three entered the victoria which was waiting and were driven down to the shore.

They found the boat in readiness, Lady Constance having been expected fully an hour before; it was lying at anchor a few yards from the shore, but on the beach there was a punt waiting to convey the ladies to the yawl. There was a fresh breeze blowing, and the waves were breaking into

foam. By the Countess's request, Constance was the first to go out; when she had been safely put on board the dingy returned to the shore to bring out Lady Seaforth and the Duke. To the girl's amazement and annoyance it returned bringing the Duke only, while the Countess, who had evidently changed her mind about sailing, waved her adieux from the shore.



CHAPTER XII.

CHAPTER XII.

THE second dinner-bell had sounded and most of Mrs. Meason's guests were assembled in the drawing-room, before Constance returned from her expedition on the sea. Her protracted absence caused some anxiety, but the moment she appeared amongst them, looking somewhat paler than she had done at starting, all uneasiness vanished, except, indeed, from the mind of Mrs. Meason, who, after one look at the girl's face, clearly divined it was no ordinary circumstance which had kept her absent so long. At that moment, however, an explanation of any kind was

impossible; everybody was wearying for dinner. Constance was exhorted to dress quickly, which she contrived to do; and in less than ten minutes she was down again.

"Constance," said Mrs. Meason, when they were all seated at table, "where is the Duke?"

In a moment the girl felt that all eyes were upon her. She looked up, flushing slightly, and replied as lightly as possible:

"I suppose by this time he is at home, Grandma."

"But did he not return with you, child? He had accepted an invitation to dine here this evening——"

"That was before he knew what kind of a day he was going to have," interrupted the girl, hurriedly. Even the Duke

d'Azzeglio is not a prophet; when he said he would dine here, he had not anticipated that, in order to keep his word, he would be compelled to eat his dinner in clothes which were saturated with sea-water."

"It was foolish to take him out on the sea."

"I did not ask him to go, Grandma. Besides, when we started there was only a very slight breeze and no swell. It was afterwards that the wind rose and the sea broke into waves, which drenched the Duke from head to foot."

"What a mercy it was that I changed my mind in time," said the Countess, with a shudder, "and remained on shore. Where did you leave him, Constance?"

"Here—that is, quite close to the Castle. He brought me home, and then he

hurried away—to change his clothes, I presume, which were certainly not in a fit condition for him to wear."

"Perhaps he will come up after dinner," said the Countess. "If he does not, we ought to make up a little party and go down to enquire after his health. It is a lovely moonlight night; the drive would be charming, and the expedition altogether would be a most romantic one."

Several voices seconded the Countess's motion. Constance, however, said nothing; she was thankful at being seated beside Lord Seaforth, who, instead of troubling her with conversation, allowed her to eat her dinner in peace.

After dinner, all the ladies went to the drawing-room, but Constance pleaded headache, and at once sought her room.

There she remained until she believed that every soul in the house had retired to rest; then she came forth, looking very pale and agitated, and hurriedly passed on to her grandmother's room.

Mrs. Meason still wore her dinner-dress, and, although the hour was midnight, she was sitting at her desk busily writing. When the door opened and Constance came in, the old lady looked up, not in any way astonished, since she had almost expected a visit from her granddaughter, but she thought it better to feign surprise.

"Are you not in bed, my child?" she said, as the girl came hurriedly towards her and knelt trembling at her feet.

"No, Grandma," returned the girl earnestly, "I did not intend to go to bed; I retired because I had a headache and was

excited. I knew I could not sleep until I had spoken with you alone."

"You have something important to say, Constance?"

"Yes, something very important, grandma. Do you remember the scene which took place between us a few months ago? You asked me to swear that I would never speak to anyone of my engagement to Frank without your express permission. I did as you wished, and I have never broken my oath. To-day I was sorely tempted to break it, therefore I want you to release me from it—will you?"

The old lady looked at her quietly for a moment, then she said:

"No; I cannot release you. There is no reason why you should speak—there

is every reason why you should remain silent."

"I tell you, grandma, there are urgent reasons why I should speak. This secresy places me and others in a false position. They think I am free, whereas I am as much bound as if I were already a married woman."

The old lady looked at her steadily, and asked:

"Why do you wish to divulge this secret? Whom do you wish to tell?"

"I wish to tell the Duke d'Azzeglio, because——"

"Yes, because?"

"He has asked me to become his wife."



CHAPTER XIII.

CHAPTER XIII.

"THE Duke d'Azzeglio has asked you to marry him?" said Mrs. Meason.

"Yes, grandma. For some time I have feared he would do so, and I have tried every means in my power to prevent it; but this evening, as we were returning to the castle, he did me the honour to offer me his hand"

"You say well, child," returned the old lady, whose pale cheek had flushed with excitement. "It was an honour which has been coveted by many great ladies, and to think that it should come to my child! Well, Constance, what did you say?"

The girl looked up quickly.

"What did I say?" she repeated. "Dear grandma, what could I say? I told him that while I was fully sensible of the honour he did me, I regretted extremely that he had spoken, since I could never respond to his wishes.

"And he accepted his dismissal?"

"Far from it. My refusal made him urge his suit the more. When he left me he said he should continue to hope until he heard that I was pledged to another man. That is why I wish to be released from my promise. And now I have told you, you will release me from it, will you not? You will allow me to tell the Duke that I am engaged to Frank, and then he will cease to pursue me?"

She paused, but no answer came. The old lady's face was as white as that of a corpse, her hands opened and shut convulsively, her breath came in short, quick pants.

"Grandma!" cried the girl, "what is the matter? For Heaven's sake speak to me! Is there more trouble, more misery, than what has gone before?"

"Trouble? yes, if you make it—misery? if you will. The time has come for you to choose, Constance!"

"Grandma, what do you mean?"

"I mean that you must marry the Duke d'Azzeglio."

"Marry the Duke? Grandma, you don't know what you are saying. Am I not bound to Frank?"

"No! On the very day he left I told

him I would not have you bound. He asked for a secret marriage, and I refused to grant his wish. I told him his proposition was a cowardly one, worthy only of his father's son."

"Grandma!" cried the girl, "you said this to Frank? You could bear to treat him so cruelly when he was going away to place himself in mortal peril? It was wicked, it was unjust!"

"Constance, what I did was for your sake. Was I going to see you sacrificed to satisfy his selfish whim? No. I know what men are, cruel and selfish at best, and this man whom you have set up as an idol is no better than the rest. What is his boasted affection? Nothing but a mockery and a sham. Against my wish he stole your heart. Then he de-

manded a sacrifice, by which no one but himself would have gained. Say that you had married him—what then? If the war had spared him, he would have returned to claim you, and to share the wealth which has come to you through me. If he had died, you, my child would have become the wretched widow of one without fortune, and without a name!"

"You know how dearly he loves me!"

"I know that you are rich, while he is poor. Frank Howarth is a man of the world. He is his father's son."

"His father's son! Do you hate Frank because he bears his father's name?"

"I do not love him for it, Constance. I love him still less for having turned you against me."

"Indeed—indeed he has not!" cried the girl. "He loves me, and would be kind to you if you would only let him. Grandma, tell me why do you hate his father so much?"

"Because I remember my child."

"Your child!" cried the girl. "My dear mother? Grandma, is there more mystery? Tell me what it means?"

For a moment she hesitated, her pale cheek flushed: her features were strangely contracted. With an effort she controlled herself, and quietly took the girl's hand.

"Constance, my child," she said, "you have often asked me to show you the room where your poor mother died. I will show it you to-night."

She took up a small oil lamp which stood upon her writing-table, and walked

from the room, followed closely by Constance.

They passed along the corridors towards the west wing of the Castle, pausing at length before a door which had not been opened for years. Mrs. Meason now handed the lamp to Constance, and producing a key from the bosom of her dress, she unlocked the door and pushed it wide open; then, taking the lamp from the girl's cold hand, she entered the room and stood in the middle of the floor, looking wearily about her.

"Come in, Constance," she said; "come in, my child, and look at the room."

Trembling violently, the girl obeyed, and stood like a statue by her grandmother's side. What the room was like she could not tell, but she felt that the air

was clammy and cold as that of a tomb. The light shed by the little oil lamp which her grandmother held on high fell upon a bed, at which the old lady pointed.

"Constance," she said, "look at that bed. For weeks and weeks your mother lay there, neglected and alone, dying of a broken heart. When she was dead, I took you in my arms, and, kneeling beside that bed, and looking into her sweet face, all white and cold, I swore that you should avenge her!"

"Avenge her! How could I do that? You say my poor mother died of a broken heart. I know it. Frank has told me. It was my father who killed her."

"Your father? He told you that? Then I spoke wisely when I said he was his father's son. As your mother was

deceived, he would deceive you. But he shall not, for I will tell you what, in pity for you, in mercy for myself, I have kept concealed until now. Your mother died, as he said; in the sight of Heaven she was cruelly murdered, but it was not your father who killed her!"

"Not my father?"

"No, for I do not blame the hand which does the deed so much as the will that controls it. What your father did, he did through the influence of others, not from any wish of his own. When my child married him, it was against my wish and will. I was rich, he was poor, with nothing to boast of but his title. Besides, he was not the husband for my child, who was a gentle, loving girl. I knew from the first moment of our ac-

quaintance with the Howarths that they looked down upon us as *parvenus*, and I hated them for it. Well, I suppose they would never have looked our way but for one thing. Your father, who was your mother's senior by thirty years, had led a reckless life, and was ruined both in health and fortune, while your mother was in the full bloom of girlhood, and the richest heiress in England. They might regard her as a *parvenue;* they did; but she was beautiful enough to nurse a worn-out man of the world, while her wealth could restore his fortunes."

"If you knew all this, grandma, why did you not tell her, and save her?"

"I tried to save her; I spoke to her as I did to you on that day when you told me that you had given your love to a

Howarth. Where was the use? She answered me as you did, 'I cannot give him up, ask anything but that,' she said, 'for I love him and he loves me.' Well, in spite of all I said, she married him, and then the misery began. Your father had a brother, who hated him because he was the elder son, and inherited the title, which would otherwise have descended to himself and his heirs. Your father married, and from that moment the family, headed by this man, determined to hunt your mother down."

"Oh! this is terrible!" cried the girl, as she covered her face with her hand and moaned.

The old lady did not look at her now, her eyes were fixed as if she were gazing upon some well-remembered scene.

"Your mother was a sweet girl, Constance," she continued, dreamily; "night and day she tried to conciliate these aristocrats, who heaped slights and insults upon both her and me, until she was about to become a mother. Then they regarded her with positive hatred, dreading lest she should bear a son. I remonstrated, and was driven from the house!"

"Driven from the house?"

"Yes; at the very hour when my child most needed a mother's care, a mother's love, I was forcibly driven from her side, and she was left in the power of one whose sole object it was to harass her into her grave. A few weeks after my return home, my poor child followed me. When I looked at her it almost broke my heart;

they had taken all her beauty, health, and happiness from her—my beautiful child, whom I had given away only a few months before, had returned to me a weary, heart-broken woman—who, at nineteen years of age, was longing to lie down and die."

She paused again, for Constance had sunk upon the floor, and was crying hysterically.

"It is horrible, horrible!" she said. "My poor, poor mother!"

"She threw herself into my arms, Constance, and cried as if her heart would break. 'I have come home, mother," she said. 'Please God, I have come home to die, for I am so weary. I want you,' she continued, eagerly, 'to keep my child when it is born; to hide it

from that man, or he will kill it, as he has tried to kill me.' I promised, and when she died, I took you from her cold bosom, and brought you up, hoping that you would become proud and powerful, and pass by the Howarths like a Queen. I hated them all, but most of all I hated one man, he who had persecuted my child through life, and driven her to her grave That man, Constance, now bears your father's title—he is the Earl of Harrington —Frank Howarth's father!"

"Frank's father? he killed my mother!"

"He broke your mother's heart!"

"O, Grandma, it can't be true; there must be some mistake, some fatal miscon ception!"

"There is no mistake. His father hunted your mother into her grave. With

her dying lips she, the gentlest creature on earth, cursed his very name."

"But where was my father, that he suffered this?"

"Your father, Constance, was an old man, an invalid, entirely under the influence of his brother, who worked day and night to poison his mind against his wife, and he succeeded. Well, little good his crimes have done him: the curse of my poor heart-broken child has pursued him, and will pursue him to the end. What is he now—a miserable man, with a barren coronet, which is stained with your mother's blood."

The girl shuddered.

"I cannot believe it," she said. "Frank knows nothing of this, has never spoken of it, and his father, who you say behaved

so infamously, is quite willing that I should become Frank's wife."

"Shall I tell you why he is willing, Constance? It is because he knows Frank is penniless, and that you will inherit my wealth. The man who killed the mother now pursues the daughter, not for love, but for wealth; but while I have strength to prevent it, my money shall not go to enrich the son of a man who killed my beloved child!"

* * * * *

Half-an-hour later Mrs. Meason went in search of Lady Constance's maid. Having roused her, she led her to the deserted room in the west wing, where they found Constance laying in a fainting fit upon the floor. Mrs. Meason deigned no explanation, but she assisted the astonished servant

to carry her mistress back to her own apartments. Once there, Constance was with some difficulty restored to consciousness; then she was given a sleeping draught and got to bed. When she was fairly settled, Mrs. Meason retired, though during the whole of that night she never closed her eyes.



CHAPTER XIV.

CHAPTER XIV.

WHEN Constance awoke to full consciousness it was broad day. The sun was shining in at her window, and she could hear the sound of footsteps and voices in the corridors without.

Her head was aching terribly; her brain was clouded. She pressed her hand upon her eyes and tried to think. Had she had a wild nightmare, or was it real? Had she indeed visited the room where her mother died, and heard a story which, if true, threatened to separate her from the man whom she loved so dearly? She could hardly believe that it was real.

She was hoping against hope that she had had some terrible dream.

Quietly slipping from her bed, she put on her dressing-gown and slippers and hurried from the room. The corridors were deserted, most of the inmates of the castle had gone to breakfast, so she passed along unnoticed, and finally gained the door of the empty room. She looked at it and shuddered; the key was in the lock, she turned it, and gently pressed the door, which swung slowly open.

Again came that death-like odour of damp which had clung about her on the preceding night, when she stood in the ghostly chamber. For a moment she stood pressing her hand upon her heart; then with an effort she moved forward, and found herself once more in the room.

It was a good-sized room, and prettily furnished, but over everything there had passed the hand of decay. All the colours were dim and subdued; the heavy velvet curtains were faded, the old oaken furniture looked black with age.

Over the chimney-piece, which was of massive carved oak, hung a large oil-painting, which represented the head and shoulders of a young girl.

As Constance looked at this picture she trembled violently. She knew it was her mother, in the full flush of girlhood; but side by side with this picture was another, the sight of which made the girl turn as pale as a corpse. The picture represented a portion of a room—the very room in which Constance was standing—and the outline of a bed, on which a corpse was

lying. The corpse was that of a woman still young, still beautiful, but with the marks of intense sorrow and suffering set on every feature of her face. She lay upon the bed with her hands crossed upon her breast, and flowers about her pillow. Beneath this picture was written in a clear, bold hand:

"My child dead, and cruelly murdered! If it pleases God to spare me, her death shall be avenged!

"JANE MEASON."

Suppressing a cry of terror, Constance turned from the picture and looked at the bed; the same on which, eighteeen years before, her mother lay dying, and, if Mrs. Meason spoke truly, cursing with her dying

lips the man who had killed her! That man was Frank's father, and, if she kept to the troth which she had plighted, would soon be her own! But could she do this? Could she marry Frank, and, as his wife, become a happy member of a family circle, every member of which had conspired to bring misery, and ultimately death, to her own dear mother? Above all, could she ever endure to be in the company of the one man, who, according to Mrs. Meason, had been the originator of all the cruelty that had been committed?

"No, no, I could not," she cried, desperately; "my mother's spirit stands between us. And yet—how can I bear to part from Frank? It is terrible—it breaks my heart!"

Trembling with excitement, she left the

room, and hurried back to her grandmother's apartments. Entering hurriedly, she threw herself at the old lady's feet.

"Grandma," she cried, "tell me that this story is not true. Say it was not Frank's father who behaved so, and I will bless you till my dying day!"

The old lady started and turned pale. She looked at the girl's tortured face, and seemed to hesitate, but her indecision was but momentary. The next minute her features had hardened again into their former fixed resolve.

"Constance," she said quietly, "I cannot say this. Would to God I could! If I had told you of this a year ago, you would have been spared much pain."

"In Heaven's name, Grandma, why did you not tell me?"

"Because I lacked the courage, Constance. Much sorrow and suffering had unnerved me, and whenever I looked upon your tear-stained face, I seemed to be gazing upon the vision of my own dead child, and I thought my heart would break. If you had given up Frank Howarth, as I asked you to do, you would never have known your poor mother's story. All I wished was to spare you pain. I consented to your engagement because I thought that opposition made you the more determined. I made that engagement a long one, because I believed and hoped that before the time had expired your girlish infatuation for this man would have passed away. I knew you could never become his wife."

"Then you should have spoken; you

should have told me the truth at once. Then it might have been easier for me to part with him. But now, God help me, I love him better than I love my life!"

"You are a child; you do not know yourself, Constance; be a woman! avenge your mother's death on these people, who treated her as dust beneath their feet. Do not suffer them to destroy your happiness as hers was destroyed. Could you accept affection from a man whose hands are stained with your mother's blood? You could not, therefore you cannot marry his son. Forget him; forget them all, my child. Why should they darken your life as they darkened hers? Take the path which leads to happiness and honour, and you will receive your mother's blessing and mine."

"Happiness and honour," moaned the girl; "there is no happiness for me!"

"You mistake, my child; there is happiness within your grasp, if you will only take it. There is the Duke d'Azzeglio.

"Don't!" cried the girl in terror. "Do not mention his name."

"He is a man of unblemished honour, and he worships you, my child."

She sadly shook her head.

"You mistake, Grandma. The Duke does not love me, though he has asked me to become his wife; but even if he did love me, my answer to him would be the same."

"You refuse to marry the Duke?"

"I absolutely refuse."

"And in spite of the terrible story which you have heard, you intend to marry Frank Howarth?"

The girl uttered a cry of pain.

"Do not speak of him," she cried, "I cannot bear it—it breaks my heart! But if I cannot marry him, I can at least be true to him, and love him till I die."

CHAPTER XV.

CHAPTER XV.

BY noon that day, nearly every inmate of Avondale Castle became aware of the fact that on the preceding night a terrible scene had been enacted between Mrs. Meason and her granddaughter, and that, as a consequence of this, Lady Constance was seriously ill. What the quarrel had been about no one knew. Constance remained in her room, and refused to be seen by anyone, and although Mrs. Meason, feeling it incumbent upon her to do the honours of the house to her guests, came down to preside at the dinner-table, she looked so ghastly, and remained so silent,

that she seemed to be presiding at a funeral feast. Under these circumstances most of the visitors deemed it prudent to take their leave, and very soon the Castle was cleared of all save the Countess of Seaforth.

It was from no very ardent wish to stay at Avondale that the Countess remained; she had simply a desire to arrange matters for Lady Constance, in other words, to compass her engagement to the Duke d' Azzeglio. This done, she would be able to return home in peace, to dream of fresh honours for the oncoming season, when, in the estimation of society, she would be raised a step higher, by reason of her intimate friendship with so very eminent a personage as the Duchess d'Azzeglio. When, therefore, Lord Sea-

forth proposed that he and his wife should follow the example of their late companions, and make a hasty retreat from Avondale Castle, the Countess informed him that she had fully made up her mind to remain.

"But I do not wish to keep you here, dear," she added, graciously; "in fact, I think you would be better away."

"But what will you do?" asked his lordship; "won't you find being here alone rather dull work, Emily?"

"Just at first, perhaps; but I shall have Treffine and Flora (the two dogs), and you can send me down a box of books from the Grosvenor. But whether I find it dull or not, I positively must stay to console poor Mrs. Meason and Constance."

His lordship smiled. He had never

before regarded his wife in the light of a consoler. However, if she chose to assume that *rôle* it was her affair, not his. So he went to town feeling pretty confident that in a very few days she would follow him. But in this he was mistaken. The Countess was by no means devoid of determination when, as in this case, she had great issues at stake. At first she found it, as her husband had anticipated, terribly dull. No one, not even the Duke d'Azzeglio, came near the house, while Mrs. Meason and her granddaughter kept continually to their rooms.

The Countess had thought at first that Mrs. Meason would make some communication to her, but since she did not choose to do so, the little lady, instead of asking questions, endeavoured to see Constance

and try, if possible, to read something in her face. But Constance was too ill to be seen; so for a couple of days at least the Countess had to amuse herself with her dogs and her costumes, and the novels which her husband had sent her from town. At length, however, her patience was rewarded—a message came from Lady Constance in answer to one which had been sent; intimating that she would be pleased to receive the Countess in her boudoir. Full of excitement Lady Seaforth went, and to her amazement found Constance as calm and collected as she had always been.

She was certainly very pale, and very reserved, since she said nothing whatever about all that had passed. The Countess remained with her friend for a couple of

hours, then, having elicited nothing, she rose to go.

"Won't you come down to dinner to-night, Constance?" she said, "it is dreadfully dull."

"I cannot come down to dinner," returned the girl, who shrank from any meeting with her grandmother, "but if you wish I will dine with *you*, Lady Seaforth."

"A *tête-à-tête?*" exclaimed the Countess, vivaciously, "that would be charming, dear."

The girl smiled wearily.

"It would be a little less dull than dining alone, perhaps," she said. "I am not very good company now, but if you prefer my company to my absence you shall have it. I owe you some repara-

tion for the sacrifice you have made in staying here at all."

"Sacrifice, my darling Constance! pray do not talk of sacrifice in the matter. You know, do you not, dear, that I would do anything in the world for you? If ever you are in need of advice come to me, dear, and be sure that I shall help you to the very best of my power."

Having given this hint, the Countess took her departure, hoping that it would take due effect by the time she met Constance at dinner.

While Constance was entertaining Lady Seaforth in her boudoir, her grandmother was paying a visit of ceremony to the Duke d'Azzeglio. Since that long-to be-

remembered expedition on the sea, several days had passed, and the Duke had made no attempt either to present himself at Avondale Castle or to inquire as to the health of its inmates. This conduct alarmed Mrs. Meason, who naturally thought that the conduct of her granddaughter had been so offensive as to induce him to exclude the ladies of Avondale Castle from the list of his friends.

Her ardent wish to make the Duke her grandson led her to do a questionable deed. She determined to call upon him, and, if possible, put matters right between him and Constance. The moment, therefore, that the Countess was safely lodged in her friend's boudoir, Mrs. Meason ordered her brougham and drove down

to call upon the Duke. She found him at home, and was ushered immediately into his presence. He received her courteously, and when she spoke of Lady Constance his face grew grave.

"You will pardon me, madam," said he with grave courtesy, "but this is a subject which I must decline to discuss, even with you. The lady has given me her answer. I suppose, as a gentleman, I should accept it, and say no more."

"Indeed," replied Mrs. Meason. "Then if you can accept defeat so easily, I fear your love for my granddaughter was not very strong."

The Duke shrugged his shoulders.

"I offered to make her my wife," he returned.

"Lady Constance," pursued Mrs. Meason,

"is fully sensible of the honour which you conferred upon her when you offered her your hand. She refused that honour, not from any feeling of aversion towards yourself, but because she believed that she was not at liberty to accept it."

The Duke started.

"Not at liberty?" he said. "Are, then, her affections engaged? and, if so, why have you kept the matter secret? It was placing both her and myself in equivocal positions."

"My dear Duke," said Mrs. Meason, "there has been no concealment because there has been nothing to conceal. Lady Constance is not engaged, but she is the soul of honour, and until a short time ago she believed that she was bound by a foolish promise, given half jestingly in

childhood. At one time she was thrown much into the society of her cousin, who has now gone to the war. She gave him a foolish promise, which she now regrets, since it can never be fulfilled."

Having once aroused the Duke's curiosity and gained his ear, Mrs. Meason continued to talk to him confidentially. When she left she had extracted from him a promise to call personally at Avondale Castle and inquire for Lady Constance. The Duke accompanied her to the carriage, and, with a sinister expression upon his face, watched it roll away.

"She hates these Howarths," he said, "and although she does not love me, she wishes to have me for her grandson. It will answer my purpose to fall in with her wishes in this case. Let me see; there was

a story about Mrs. Meason and the Howarths. What was it? I must know."

He returned to his room, touched a small handbell which stood upon his table, and his Spanish servant appeared.

"Sènor," said the man, standing in the doorway.

The Duke ordered him to come forward. Then he spoke rapidly in Spanish. In less than a week from that day the Duke was fully aware of the true story of the life and death of the young Countess of Harrington.

"The old lady is dangerous," he said to himself when he was fully acquainted with the true facts of the case; "but she cannot be dangerous to me. I know her—that is enough."

After her interview with the Duke, Mrs.

Meason was in a more contented frame of mind; she was in a mood to be companionable, and was very much astonished when the Countess did not present herself as usual at the dinner-table She was still more astonished when, on making inquiries, she learned that the Countess was dining with Lady Constance. Since that night when the ghostly chamber had been reopened, and the terrible story had been told, Mrs. Meason had made several attempts to see her granddaughter but had failed.

Lady Constance, in answer to her grandmother's anxious inquiries, had always said she was too ill to see any one; on this occasion, therefore, Mrs. Meason sent no message; but later in the evening she went without warning of any kind to

her granddaughter's room. Lady Constance was alone, sitting in an easy chair with her lap full of her cousin's letters.

When her grandmother entered she started; then with a shudder she tried to put the letters aside.

"Constance," said Mrs. Meason, gravely, "why do you turn from me, child?"

The girl did not reply; she could not—her eyes were full of tears, her bosom was heaving—if she had uttered one word she would have sobbed hysterically.

Mrs. Meason sat beside her and took her hand; she trembled, but did not draw it away.

"Child, child, why are you grieving like this?" said Mrs. Meason, softly; "are these people to blight your life as they

blighted the life of my child; can you not forget this man?"

"No, I cannot," cried the girl; "I shall never forget him. Do not ask too much, grandma, or you will kill me!"

"Then if you cannot forget him, marry him."

The girl threw up her hands in terror.

"I cannot," she said; "not now. Whenever I think of it I see my mother gazing at me with sad, reproachful eyes, and I know if I married Frank she would always gaze at me so; I should never get rest or peace, never. I wish, oh, how I wish you had never spoken! it would have been better, I am sure; then I might have had some happiness. I shall never have it now."

For a time neither of the ladies spoke, Presently Mrs. Meason said:

"Would you like to leave Avondale, Constance?"

"If you wish it," replied the girl, wearily.

"My darling, it is of *you* I am thinking. Everything here reminds you of the past. With fresh surroundings you would be brighter and happier. You would be better able to live for the future; you would sooner forget the past. Good-night, my darling. Do not shrink from me; it is cruel. All I have done I have done for your sake; remember that!" She kissed the girl lightly on the forehead, and went away.

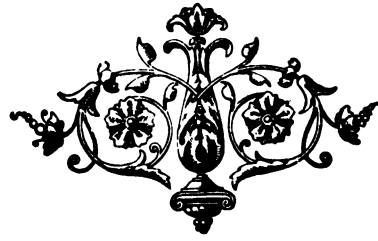
When she was gone Constance sat motionless for fully half-an-hour. Then

she went to her writing-table, and sat down to write.

"I know now," she wrote, "that I can never become your wife. Try to forget me. It would have been better for us both if we had never met. Do not think that I am writing a hasty decision. I have reflected well, and I am sure it will be better that we release each other. I pray to God that we may never meet again.

"CONSTANCE."

Having written this, she placed it in an envelope and addressed it to Captain Howarth. Then she sat down, kissed the letters which she had had in her lap, and placed them one by one in the fire.



CHAPTER XVI

CHAPTER XVI.

THE summer months had completely passed away; autumn was well advanced, yet the family still lingered at Avondale Castle. Although Mrs. Meason had mentioned a change of scene, she made no attempt to effect it, while Constance was too indifferent to make a proposition of any kind; the Countess of Seaforth, unable to endure for any time the tedium of this country life, had returned to town, but the Duke d'Azzeglio remained.

The Duke was again a constant visitor at Avondale Castle; indeed, his visit was now the great event of the day, and was

looked for with pleasure by all, including Lady Constance herself.

At first, knowing what had passed, she had shrunk from meeting the Duke. After their first interview, however, her uneasiness vanished; the Duke was so courteous, so kind—by a hundred little kindnesses he won the girl's gratitude.

She said to him one day:

"I once did you a wrong—in thought. I ask your pardon. You are very good, I am sure, or you would not be so forgiving, so kind to me."

The Duke looked at her. She was sitting in a large arm-chair near the open window, the moonlight was streaming in, making her pale face still paler.

"If I could make you happy," he said, "I should be content."

"Make me happy!" repeated the girl, "I do not think there is any happiness in this world."

"Lady Constance," said the Duke, gravely; "pray pardon me if I mention a subject which may be a painful one to you. I have heard that you are attached to your cousin!"

She did not answer him, but, with a shudder, she covered her eyes with her hand.

"May I ask," pursued the Duke quietly, "if your cousin is a poor man?"

"He is not rich," said Constance.

"You are doubtless aware," said the Duke, watching her quietly from between the half closed lids of his eyes, "that I am rich beyond the desire of any man. I should value my wealth for the first

time if I could make it of service to you."

"To *me*," said Constance, who feared that the Duke was again about to propose to her, and grew terrified.

"I will explain," he continued, noting every expression of her face. "I tell you I am rich, and could easily spare the half of my wealth, and I will, if by so doing I can secure your happiness. Tell me, is it not possible?"

"I do not understand."

"I mean I will make your cousin a rich man."

"And then?"

"And then I suppose you would become his wife."

"Become his wife?—no, never!"

"Lady Constance!"

"You do not understand, sir, when you talk like that. I and my cousin can never be more than cousins—we can never be man and wife."

"Is this true?"

"It is quite true."

"You do not wish to marry him?"

"No, I do not wish it."

The Duke was about to reply when the door opened, and a servant entered with a letter for Lady Constance. One glance at it, and the blood flowed back to her heart. It was from Frank Howarth.

Half dazed and wholly heart sick, Constance rose from her seat.

"Will you excuse me?" she said faintly. The Duke bowed, and led her from the room. Constance hurried to her boudoir, tore open the letter, and read:

"My Darling Constance,—Your letter has driven me mad. In Heaven's name, what does it all mean? Not that you do not love me! I will never believe that; but that some evil influence has come between us, and you have listened. Oh! how I curse my fate! I am here helpless, and in danger of losing you. I should ask my father to come to you, but I know he would be turned from the door of Avondale Castle, and I am here, and helpless. If I am to lose you, perhaps God will be merciful and let the next bullet lay me low. If I escape, be sure that I shall come to you, and ask for the fulfilment of your promise. For pity's sake, my Constance, write to me and tell me I have had a horrible dream.

"Frank."

She stood for a time clutching the paper with feverish fingers, and moaning like one in pain. Then she sank almost fainting into a chair.

All that night she scarcely closed her eyes. The next day she put the letter in her pocket, and went out to walk in Avondale Park. It was a clear, fresh day, with a touch of frost in the air, the keen breath of which touched the girl's forehead and revived her. She was able to think. She walked for some time. Then she sat down on the trunk of a fallen tree, and re-read Frank's letter.

She had not proceeded far in the reading when she was startled by a sudden rustling of the boughs. She rose, looked about her, but saw no one, and proceeded to finish

reading her letter, when she was again startled. This time the sound of footsteps fell upon her ear, a figure approached her, it was the Duke d'Azzeglio.

"I was on my way to the Castle," said the Duke, taking her hand, "when I saw you coming towards the Park, and followed. I have something to say to you, Lady Constance. Shall I say it now, or defer it till some future time?"

"As you please."

"Then I will say it now. Last night, after you had retired, I spoke for a while with Mrs. Meason. I told her you were pale and sad, and needed change. She agreed with me; a change to Spain might be beneficial; therefore I place my house entirely at your disposal. . . . And, Lady Constance, if you think well of the

proposition which I made to you last night, you have but to say so. The half of my fortune is yours, to dispose of as you wish. I shall think it well spent if it secures your happiness."

"It does not require thinking of," returned the girl. "It is not money that I want, it is peace and forgetfulness."

"Then you will accept my invitation, and honour my poor house with your presence? Only say yes, and I will bid my servants prepare as if for the reception of a queen."

He spoke eagerly and quickly, and fixed his dark eyes upon her with a strange piercing glance. The girl shook her head.

"You are good," she said, "but I would rather remain at Avondale."

"For why—to be tortured daily, hourly, by sights and memories which wring your heart and make your young life purgatory? You are young, you are beautiful, yet you hide yourself in this lonely spot until the world forgets you as much as if you were in your grave."

She rose quietly from her seat, and would have walked away, but he detained her.

"Lady Constance, I am years older than you, and I have had much experience of the world. May I speak to you as a friend?"

"As a *friend*—yes."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Do not fear; I am not going to talk to you of *love*. It is of your lonely life here, your wasted days and hours, that I would

speak. You would adorn a palace, and should rule the world of fashion like a queen."

He spoke very earnestly, and his dark eyes glowed with a fire which made her soul sick.

"It is a world I never loved," she said, coldly, "and now I love it less than ever. All I wish is to hide myself in some lonely spot, and remain forgotten, as if I were in my grave."

"Such fancies arise from the morbid influence of your solitary life. At your age to despise the world is unnatural. We have in Spain a proverb, which says, 'The fairer the flower, the more it needs the sunshine.' I wish I could persuade you of its truth."

"There is no sunshine in the world.

"On the contrary—the world is full of it."

"You mean that it is full of vain enjoyment."

"Say, rather, full of noble pleasures. Lady Constance, you were not born to waste your life in solitude; you were made to rule as surely as a star in heaven is made to shine."

"Pray do not speak so, if we are to remain friends."

He shrugged his shoulders, and his face grew grave.

"My child," he said, "what you offer me is not friendship. The office of a friend is a sacred one, and means much. A friend should console and help; you refuse to let me do either."

"Because I cannot."

"You cannot?"

"No; there are certain things which even a friend cannot understand, and sorrows which cannot be shared. You offer to be my friend. I will accept your offer, if you will not demand a confidence I cannot give."

"I accept the condition," replied the Duke. "And now, Lady Constance, may I walk with you back to the Castle?"

She bowed. She could not refuse his offer, though at that moment she was wearying to be alone. The Duke was kind, and she was fully sensible of his kindness, but her sole thought was of her lover who was far away.

The two passed on, keeping to the avenue of beech trees which led to the Castle.

Scarcely had they gone a hundred yards when a figure, that of a man, emerged from the shadow of the trees, and stood fixing his eyes upon the retreating figure of the Duke.

The stranger was a middle-aged man, evidently a gentleman, though his clothes were ragged and travel-stained; and when he moved he limped, as if his feet were blistered with the worn-out shoes he wore.

He had a jaunty, careless air. He laughed, snapped his fingers, and slapped his thigh.

"So," he said, "I have found my gentleman at last! May imprudence dance attendance on revenge, and aid my purpose! I have waited patiently for years. I have crossed the world in pursuit

of him; I have followed him from land to land, and *now* we are to meet! Keep calm, Feveral, keep calm; it is in a comedy you are playing, not a tragedy—*yet.* Let me see, what am I? An artist, and for the present, at least, I must follow my vocation. To begin with, I will sketch the Ranger's Lodge, make a few inquiries, then wait for chance to send me—the Duke d'Azzeglio."

END OF VOL. I.

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